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In U.S., Adventist school's efforts help Jewish athletes keep Sabbath, compete

More than a decade of dogged persistence by a Seventh-day Adventist academy in Fort Worth, Texas, United States, may have helped another parochial school - this time an Orthodox Jewish institution - gain a tournament rescheduling to move a game away from the biblical Sabbath, which both Jews and Adventists observe.

Facing a federal lawsuit filed by three parents and three students at the Houston school, the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS) said it would relent and reschedule a semi-final game away from Sabbath hours. That would allow students from the Robert M. Beren Academy, the Orthodox Jewish school, to compete.

The lawsuit, which included the Mansfield (Texas) Independent School District, slated to host the competition, alleged religious discrimination on the defendant's part, which is prohibited under civil rights laws.

Annise Parker, Houston's mayor, and United States Senator John Cornyn, were among those who called on TAPPS to make an accommodation, media reports indicated.

"Unlike many people, TAPPS does follow the law, and we will comply," TAPPS Executive Director Edd Burleson told the Houston Chronicle, which was among several national media outlets that covered the story, along with ESPN.com and The New York Times.

The Sabbath question was one Burleson had faced before, beginning in 2001. That's when Burton Adventist Academy, located in Arlington, Texas, a Fort Worth suburb, had "a really good basketball team," school athletic director Kevin Klein recalled.

Even though the Burton team had a 17-3 season, and won the agreement of the other schools slated for that year's playoffs, TAPPS was adamant: the rules were the rules, and unless the Burton team played, they'd forfeit the game. The school stood its ground, which must have disappointed the students.

The same thing happened in 2004, he added. The school had a great year, was playoff bound, but their hoop dreams were dashed by TAPPS, despite support in the community and from local media.

"The kids deserve whatever they earned," Klein explained in a telephone interview with Adventist Review. "If they earned the chance to play for a state championship, let them play for it."

By 2010's fall soccer season, however, there was a crack in the TAPPS wall: if Burton Adventist Academy would secure, and pay for, an alternate venue for the soccer final previously scheduled for the Sabbath, TAPPS would accommodate them. The school complied, but the team lost its semi-final match, keeping them from the championship game.

Klein and the school saw it as a victory: here was an opening for Sabbath-keepers to compete with other private and parochial schools, while remaining true to their beliefs. A similar situation
happened in 2011 with Burton's basketball team: the school made arrangements to cover rescheduling expenses, but lost a semifinal match.

Still, the growing momentum for Burton's students, now joined by national attention to the Beren Academy's case, may lead to a real change by TAPPS leadership.

"Our team having that opportunity really was a key part of this," Klein said, before departing to watch the Beren team play a pre-Sabbath game. "I'm just thrilled that it happened."

Beren's coach Chris Cole agreed: "All we asked for was a chance and we got it," he told ESPN.com.

Kevin Klein, athletic director of Burton Adventist Academy in Arlington, Texas, also coaches baseball at the school. He's gone to bat for Sabbath-keeping students conflicted over tournament games scheduled for the Sabbath, and helped win a reversal by the
Guatemala: Church leaders train thousands to become Vision One Million disciples

More than 700 Seventh-day Adventist small group leaders from throughout the eastern part of Guatemala recently learned how to reach more people with the gospel, continue evangelism efforts and be active participants in Inter-America's Vision One Million initiative.

The small group leaders representing 136 local churches met Feb. 18, at Obraje Auditorium in Ipala, Chiquimula. They committed to holding 1,000 evangelism campaigns to begin at the end of March. The efforts are part of Guatemala church's goal called Vision 60,000-which is part of the Vision One Million initiative.

"Our vision is to prepare 60,000 laypeople," said Pastor Gustavo Menendez, personal ministries director for the church in Guatemala, "men and women involved in the art of persuasive, active and well-grounded preaching of the gospel in each community in our territory."

Pastor Menendez said that the challenge is for each layperson to win one person and for each local church to turn into a missionary training school and an evangelism center.

So far, some 10,300 leaders in the eight church regions in Guatemala have been certified as "Vision 60,000" disciples during the last six months, according to Pastor Menendez.

Efforts will continue to reach 60,000 trained church members by 2015, church leaders said.

Eastern Guatemala plans to recruit some 8,000 lay small group leaders, said Pastor Otoniel Trujillo, personal ministries director for the church in the East Guatemala.

Nodvin Zabaleta is a bible instructor and lay preacher in the Olopa district. Zabaleta was among the 700 who met for the training and said he plans to organize a free medical screening activity and one evangelistic campaign in March. He works toward expanding his small group into a church of 70.

"This meeting motivated us to get more involved in this task and this Vision One million initiative gives us the perfect opportunity to fulfill the message of the three angels's message," said Zabaleta. "I am convinced that if we commit to preaching the Gospel we will speed up Jesus' Second Coming."

Zabaleta particularly enjoyed seminars on how to make effective altar calls and establish an intimate relationship with Jesus to be more effectual in presenting the Gospel.

The church in Guatemala plans to hold some 10,000 baptisms by Mar. 31, church leaders said.

There are more than 233,000 Seventh-day Adventists worshiping in 800 churches and congregations in Guatemala.

For more information on the Adventist Church in Guatemala, visit http://www.interamerica.org/users/index.php?type=news&id=2012&lan...