

Nazareth restricts hairstyles for graduation

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

ROCHESTER — When 87 Nazareth Academy classmates cross the stage of the Eastman Theater to receive their high school diplomas June 25, Tonya Harding will be watching from the audience.

In March, school officials told Harding and another senior, Lauren Maslanka, that unless they allowed their partly shaven hairstyles to grow out, they would not be able to participate in Nazareth's 118th commencement ceremony.

Maslanka decided to go along with school officials' request. "I was backed into a wall," she said of her decision.

Harding, however, chose to forego the graduation ceremony in order to keep her hairstyle intact.

"I didn't think one day — graduating with my class — would be worth two months of growing my hair back," explained Harding, who said she feels comfortable with her hairstyle. "When I cut my hair this way, I feel really good about myself."

Regardless of Harding's and Maslanka's feelings about their appearances, neither girl's hairstyle is proper for a Nazareth student, according to Sister Mary Clouser, assistant principal for student affairs.

"Our graduation is a very formal graduation," Sister Clouser said. "It was our feeling that the hairstyle didn't fit with the formality of the celebration. It would detract from the ceremony."

"It is a group ceremony, and it is for all of the class. (Harding's and Maslanka's)



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Nazareth Academy senior Tonya Harding peers through the wrought-iron gates of the Village Gate mall, Rochester. Because of her unusual hairstyle, Harding is not being allowed to take part in the graduation ceremony.

hairstyles may cause heckling and gasping, and could result in the next girl in line not getting recognition" from the audience, the assistant principal added.

Yet the two students have worn their controversial haircuts since the beginning of the school year. They claim that prior to March, school officials gave neither girl any indication that her hairstyle was considered a problem. "I was just another person in the hall till (March)," Maslanka said.

But since March, Harding alleged, school officials have singled her out for other disciplinary actions as a result of her hairstyle. Sister Clouser said, however, that such disciplinary actions were unrelated to the hairstyles.

The controversy has polarized Nazareth students, according to a signed editorial commentary written by the school's public relations director/journalism instructor, Sister Mary Anne Coughlin, and published in the March issue of *The Gabriel*, Nazareth's student newspaper.

"This division into camps over haircuts, individuality, is way out of whack!" asserted Sister Coughlin's *Gabriel* editorial. "Regulations are made with all in mind and for the general smooth operation of things. Not as penalties."

"A long tradition does not just cease to be, just to make (an) exception for two — it continues to include the all," the editorial continued. "There are plenty of times for displays of one's individuality, but the Eastman stage on graduation evening is not one of them."

Maslanka also charged that school officials said in March that her hairstyle and that of Harding might be "associated with skinheads or Nazis." Both students deny any involvement with such groups.

Sister Clouser responded by explaining that officials did not mention such groups by name, but that they did ask the girls to consider the types of organizations commonly associated with similar hairstyles.

Harding says her hair is an expression of her personality, and has nothing to do with extremist politics. She argued that the school's ban on her hairstyle at graduation puts too much emphasis on conformity and appearance. "Diversity is good. It concentrates more on the person and what they can do rather than just looks," she said.

Although Harding and Maslanka have responded differently to the school's ultimatum, both expressed feelings of alienation from the school.

"It feels pretty bad," Harding said, noting that only some of her friends have supported her, while others "just like the soap opera of it."

"I deserve graduation as much as anyone else, and I shouldn't be denied that because of the way I look," she said.

Continues reporting by Teresa A. Parsons.

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Graduates, parents object to new policy

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — Bishop Kearney High School's graduation this year promises to be a family affair — if the families go along with the administration's plans, that is.

Several parents and students angrily objected to the high school's blueprint for this year's ceremony, which was outlined in a letter from Brother John J. Johnson, CFC, principal. The letter was sent home to parents and seniors over the weekend of May 11. Graduation is set for June 3.

The letter explained that Kearney's 25th commencement exercises would emphasize the theme of "family" and noted that each student would be assigned three seats, two of which were reserved for their parents. The letter added that parents would accompany their child on stage to receive his or her diploma.

In previous years, Kearney seniors sat together as a class for commencement, and each student walked on stage alone to receive his or her diploma. Barbara Jablonski, school spokeswoman, explained that the new policy was put in place by Brother Johnson who had called other schools operated by his order and asked

how they had commemorated their significant anniversaries.

"I even heard of a college that did this 20 years ago," Jablonski said, noting that the idea of asking families to participate in commencement ceremonies is nothing new.

Yet several students maintained, however, that most of Kearney's senior class was upset by the change in the graduation policy.

"Well I was kind of surprised by (the policy) because it seems so late in the year to make changes and ... tell us about it," said senior Christine Jodoin, adding that she wanted to "sit as a class, not spread out," from her classmates.

"I didn't like the idea at all," commented senior Michelle Pecor. "They've never done this before at Kearney. This is one of the last times (the senior class will) be together. It's unanimous that no one wants this."

The students expressed their unanimity by staging an early morning sit-in in the school's main lobby Thursday, May 17. About 100-150 seniors took part in the protest, according to Nancy Schumacher, a sit-in participant.

Schumacher said the students didn't

know that while they were occupying the lobby, Kearney's student council president, John Hutchinson, was meeting with Brother Johnson to outline the seniors' objections to the commencement policy.

Hutchinson said the students objected to the policy for several reasons, among them the possible embarrassment caused to students whose parents were divorced, unmarried or deceased. He also echoed several other students' comments regarding their desire to receive their diplomas unaccompanied by their parents.

"The fact (is) that it's a rite of passage," Hutchinson said of commencement. "We never wanted our parents to be holding our hands ... They'd much rather watch us take the first step."

Brother Johnson left his session with Hutchinson to meet the students in the lobby, where he told them he was already meeting with their student representative. The students eventually dispersed, observers said, and the principal, noting the objections from students and some parents, revised the policy.

The new policy was explained in a second letter from Brother Johnson sent home on Friday, May 18. The letter stated that

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