Woman Denied Degree Over 'Drunken Pirate' MySpace Photo Sues School
Stacy Snyder's attorney claims degree was unfairly denied; Millersville University says photo is 'unprofessional.'

By Gil Kaufman

Fact: Stacy Snyder, then 25, wore a pirate hat and held a plastic "Mr. Goodbar" cup up to a camera at a 2005 Halloween party and uploaded the shot to her MySpace page.

Fact: Snyder attended Millersville University in Pennsylvania at the time and was working toward her lifelong goal of attaining a teaching degree.

Fact: The Millersville U. mascot is a swarthy, eye patch-wearing pirate named the Marauder, with a colorful sidekick parrot who goes by the handle Skully.

Fact: When administrators got wind of the photo labeled "Drunken Pirate" just before graduation last year, they decided to deny Snyder her education degree and teaching certificate.

Snyder, now 27, filed a federal lawsuit last week, and has given a series of interviews in which she claims that the university did not give her a chance to explain before it took action.

"The day before graduation, the college confronted me about the picture," Snyder told the Lancaster Intelligencer Journal. (Because of a reportedly vast number of media requests, Snyder, through her lawyer, declined to speak to MTV News about the lawsuit.) "I was told I wouldn't be receiving my education degree or teaching certificate because the photo was 'unprofessional.'"

Even though Snyder apologized, the dean of the University's School of Education, Jane S. Brayer, and its provost refused to issue her a Bachelor of Science degree in education and teaching certificate. Instead, it gave Snyder — a single mother of two kids' bad behavior. This poor woman got the ax before it took action.

"There's nothing in the bylaws of the school [about posting images on MySpace], and this MySpace thing came up within two days of her graduation and they removed her certification with no hearing and no opportunity to rebut those charges or confront her accusers," said Voigt, who specializes in educational-law issues.

Voigt said that even though Snyder was eventually given an academic hearing, he was not allowed to question witnesses or speak during the meeting, and it did not meet what he considers the requirements of a due-process hearing. "All she wants is her education degrees," he said.

The suit, which seeks $75,000 in compensatory damages, was filed after Snyder's attorney, Mark W. Voigt, was unable to negotiate an agreement with school officials.

April 8 to tell her there was an "issue" they had to discuss, according to the lawsuit.
When the advisor gave the picture to professor/student advisor J. Barry Girvin, he told Snyder she may "lose her teaching certificate due to the incident," the lawsuit states, though he allegedly would not give her any specific information on why that was other than to say it involved a photograph.

In a final student evaluation, Girvin gave Snyder "superior" or "competent" ratings in all areas except "professionalism," where he tagged her as "unsatisfactory." He wrote that there were "errors in judgment that relate to Pennsylvania's Code of Professional Practice and Conduct for Educators." Girvin, however, did not give any specific examples of these alleged code violations, according to the suit.

Millersville Vice President for University Advancement Amy Dmitzak said the situation with Snyder has less to do with her personal Web site — the university has no rules governing what students do on their personal social-networking sites — and more to do with "academic performance." Dmitzak said, however, that she was limited in what she could say about the case due to strict laws in Pennsylvania about student academic records. But she did confirm an academic hearing took place and that the door has not been shut to a potential appeal.

According to the lawsuit, one of the advisors at Conestoga Valley High School told Snyder that posting the picture was "unprofessional" and that if students at the school saw it, they might have "found the photo offensive," though she did not cite any rules or policies to support the claim of unprofessional behavior.

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