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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

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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 who works as a nanny for a local family — a Bachelor of Arts in English degree. In a meeting with Breyer on May 12, Snyder was accused of "promoting underage drinking" with her "drunken pirate" photo, according to the suit, even though she was well above the legal age to drink when the photo was taken.

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. He said the dollar amount is not the point; he and Snyder are decrying the lack of due process.

"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 points out that Snyder was on the dean's list and she completed her student-teaching requirements in 2006 at a local high school, and that in a letter dated February 6, 2006, Millersville's acting dean congratulated Snyder as "one of [MU's] finest student scholars." It was one of her advisors on that job at Conestoga Valley High School who saw the MySpace picture and called Snyder at home on May 8 to tell her there was an "issue" they had to discuss, according to the lawsuit.



Stacy Snyder's MySpace photograph
Photo: Stacy Snyder

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Millersville University's decision is ridiculous. How do we know what Stacy Snyder is drinking in the photo? She doesn't look drunk. Yes, the name of the photo is "unprofessional," but it has nothing to do with her professional life because it is what she did in her free time. This is just an innocent photo where she just happens to be wearing a pirate hat — supporting her school — and drinking out of a cup.

A | Peru, IN

If I am not mistaken, it is legal to drink alcohol and wear a pirate hat when you are over 21. If not, please let me know, because I've got this pirate hat, and I would hate to get kicked out of high school for wearing it and drinking my cup of tea while someone takes a picture of me.

Dana, 14 | Sir Lake, TX

If Stacy Snyder's prospective students are old enough to get on MySpace, they are old enough to understand that adults get to do things that they can't. This is another example of people blaming everyone — teachers, entertainers, the media, *anyone* except themselves for kids' bad behavior. This poor woman got the ax before

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even getting the degree she'd spent years pursuing.

Shannon, 21 | Cincinnati, OH

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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 Dmizak 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." Dmizak 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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