

December 2005

# Virtue In Action

High School Teens Stand Up for Self-Respect

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



**LEADERSHIP AND SELF-RESPECT:** A group of high-school girls in Southwest Pennsylvania "girlcott" Abercrombie & Fitch's line of t-shirts.

**Recently** Abercrombie & Fitch introduced a line of sexually-oriented t-shirts that they then decided to pull. This story and the controversy surrounding it reflect the debate about how our culture approaches sexuality. It also illustrates how some businesses use and promote certain views of sexuality to generate profits. However, the story also shows us how some are beginning to effectively rebel against this view of sexuality. This speaks to the power of individuals, united in a purpose to make a difference.

Everyone likes to be up on the latest fashion. Thus, when a new line of t-shirts came out of Abercrombie & Fitch, girls began to buy them. The t-shirts feature slogans that directly use sexuality to make a statement, such as “Who needs brains when you have these?” and “Anatomy tutor”. Other slogans centered on rudeness or disdain for others, such as “Blondes are adored, brunettes are ignored” or “I make you look fat”.

### **Humorous or Hurtful?**

Some people chuckled when they first saw the phrases on the shirts...but many others viewed them differently. One young man told an NBC Today Show reporter “I don’t know if I would want my sister to wear them.” 13-year-old Jettie Fields told NBC’s Today Show, “I saw some of my friends wearing them at school and it really just disgusts me....it’s just offensive.” Some continue to say that people are making a big deal out of something that was just meant to be funny. Others point out that the slogans are not just empty words, but portray a harmful view of sexuality and a demeaning message about the person wearing them.



### **Views on Sexuality**

Many believe that the t-shirt slogans send a message promoting sex as an activity apart from love and a long-term committed relationship. This approach to sex has consequences both for the individuals involved, and for society as a whole. We know that sexual activity involves not just our bodies but our entire person; and this is why sexual activity forms a strong emotional bond.

If this emotional bond isn’t part of the long-term relationship of marriage, then it is highly likely the bond will be broken as the couple eventually breaks up, or hasn’t even begun a committed relationship. As this emotional bond is broken, both sides, and especially teenage girls and women, often experience a sense of being used, degraded, and having less self-worth. Both sides know that they have given away something very beautiful and personal for nothing lasting in return.

In a 1999 conference, Dr. Armand Nicholi, clinical professor of psychiatry, at Harvard Medical School, discussed a study of students at Harvard who complained of emptiness and despondency. He stated, “The new sexual permissiveness was leading to empty relationships and feelings of self-contempt.” Fortunately, they also found that when students moved toward “a system of clear values--typically embracing a drug-free lifestyle and strict sexual code--they reported that their relationships with the opposite sex improved, as did their relations with peers in general.” (Character Matters by Thomas Lickona, p. 86)

Fortunately, the recent trends in teens’ views of sexuality and behavior are actually moving away from the view of sex as an activity separated from marriage. In a 2000 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 72 percent of teenage girls and 55 percent of boys who have had sexual intercourse say they wish they had waited. In the December 2002 Newsweek cover story titled “The New Virginity”, the Centers for Disease Control reported that for the first time in 25 years a majority of high school students (52%) have not



had sexual intercourse. These trends reflect the growing awareness that sex is “most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it’s part of something bigger – a continuing loving relationship between two human beings. When you’re married your sexual intimacy expresses your total commitment to each other.” It’s a realization that “the ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.”

(Character Matters by Thomas Lickona, p. 94)

### Self-Respect

A healthy self-image is built on authentic self-respect, seeing oneself as having dignity and worth as a human being. Self-respect also means fully recognizing the beautiful gifts and attributes we each possess. Our sexuality is part of our humanity and is one of these gifts.

However, when our culture over-emphasizes sexuality with slogans such “who needs brains when you have these?” we can too easily lose a true and lasting sense of self-respect. By overemphasizing sexuality we encourage some individuals to ignore developing their many other attributes, and risk making others feel less valued who may not view themselves as being sexually attractive.

### Teenagers Take a Stand

Some girls in Southwest Pennsylvania decided it was time to stand up for themselves. An organization called the Women & Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania had recently started a program to give financial support to girls who want to make a difference in the world. A group of high-school teens decided to tap into this resource to face the issue of the offensive t-shirts and to stand for their own sense of self-respect.

They called for a boycott, or rather, a “girlcott” to send a message to Abercrombie & Fitch: if you continue to degrade us, we will not shop in your stores. The girlcott began to spread as other teens began to realize that how they chose to spend, or not spend, their money gave them a way to express their views.

Many teenagers are beginning to realize that as a group they control a lot of spending and so they have a lot of power in the market place. Businesses spend millions of dollars identifying what teenagers are interested

in buying. Unfortunately, we have seen that some businesses will also use powerful natural desires such as sexuality to generate profits, even if it means demeaning sexuality from the beautiful gift that it is.

### A&F Responds

As the girlcott and negative press coverage grew, Abercrombie decided it was in its best interest to pull the offensive t-shirts. The company issued the following statement: “Abercrombie & Fitch has reached an amicable agreement with the Women & Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania under which we will stop selling several t-shirts in our stores. In recognition that these t-shirts might be found to be



objectionable to many young women, who are among our best customers, we contacted Heather Arnet, Executive Director of the Women & Girls Foundation, and offered to discuss the issue with them. We recognize that the shirts in question, while meant to be humorous, might be troubling to some. We look forward to meeting in person with representatives of the Girlcott action in the immediate future. We are pleased with this resolution.”

Women & Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania also released a statement: “The girlcott we launched this week got the attention of Abercrombie & Fitch. They contacted us and we reached an agreement that satisfies us. Several offensive t-shirts to which we objected are being removed from store shelves. We look forward to meeting with Abercrombie & Fitch to discuss ways we could collaborate on more empowering messages their products could be sending to their customers.”



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Special Note to Teachers: Due to the nature of this topic, the lesson contains statements on sexuality that may not be appropriate for some students. Please review the lesson in its entirety before determining whether to use the lesson in its entirety or only specific sections.

### Lesson Goals

- ▶ Encourage students to consider that what we wear, and other forms of outward expression, are a reflection of our level of self-respect, and affect how others view us
- ▶ Develop awareness that the messages we convey in our clothing, and other forms of outward expression, affect others and our culture as a whole.
- ▶ Consider how sexuality is viewed and used within our culture and to consider the consequences of the view of sexuality often portrayed by our culture
- ▶ Develop understanding that decisions on how we spend our money are in effect votes and statements on what we support and don't support.
- ▶ Develop understanding that business responds to us as consumers, and that we have the ultimate power in a free and competitive economy
- ▶ Realize the power of unity of purpose, that together we can make a difference, even in influencing the actions of large companies

### Highlighted Virtues

- ▶ Leadership and Self-respect

### Discussion Question Options

1. Why do people wear t-shirts with strong statements? Do you think statements on clothing reflect on the person wearing it?
2. Abercrombie & Fitch has previously pushed the limits of what is acceptable in using sexuality to promote their clothing. Why do some companies do this?
3. Do you think companies try to sell us products that only reflect only what we as consumers want? Or, do they also try to form what we desire and to form our attitudes?

In light of this story and your other experiences, how do you compare our power as consumers, relative to the power of companies offering us products and services?

4. What does this story tell us about leadership?
5. How does the lesson define self-respect? What would you add to this definition?

How do you think the t-shirts in question affect the self-respect of someone wearing them?

How do some of the slogans affect others? Do they affirm or lessen our community's sense of respect for others?

6. Do you agree that the t-shirts in question promote a view of sexuality where sex is an activity, apart from marriage? What are the arguments presented that this view of sexuality is harmful? Do you agree with them?
7. Do you think our culture over-emphasizes sexuality?

### Journal Activity Options

- A. What is the basis of your sense of self-respect? Write about the aspects of your life and your character that you value. After reviewing these statements, consider if you think your criteria for self-respect is balanced and complete? Write about whether you think you can improve in focusing on additional gifts and attributes of your personality.
- B. If you try to convey a message about yourself in the way you dress, write out what the message is. Do you think this message affirms your own self-respect? Does this message affect others?
- C. Write out you own view of sexuality. To become the best version of yourself, both now and in the future, how do you think you should approach sexuality?

### Extended Learning Activities

Students pick a clothing store and identify the "image" it tries to portray, the "attitude" it sells, and the "message" it gives. Each student should pick articles of clothing on the racks that communicate this image. Give a verbal presentation to the class on the image the store attempts to communicate, the effect you think this image has on the person wearing the clothing, and any effects on others.

Do the same project, but through magazines. Have students bring in magazine ads from clothing stores. Choose a few to discuss as a class. What image are these ads and companies trying to communicate? What effects do you think these images have, if any, on the person wearing them and on others?

**Internet Resources** Women & Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania <http://www.wgfsdpa.org/index.htm>

**Today Show video clip** <http://video.msn.com/v/us/v.htm?g=ee02ed52-4e68-4691-ba41-0ff00831a6e8,9>

**Girlcott** <http://www.cafepress.com/girlcott>