

11-18-79
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Sun

About pride and picketers

WEDNESDAY IN Clearwater was a great day for the U.S. Constitution.

A constitutional right—the freedom to peaceably assemble—was put to use by a band of Clearwater High School students who think Scientologists should pay property taxes and stop infiltrating government agencies.

All of us should be proud of the students and the style in which they expressed their opinions.

They first got in touch with the police department to learn what are the laws on picketing and demonstrating.

Then the students quietly paraded up and down in front of the Scientologists' central lair, the old Fort Harrison Hotel.

When the Scientologists sent out their front woman, Nancy Reitze, the high school students talked with her in a civilized fashion.

A couple of students reportedly accepted Reitze's invitation to tour the hotel.

Passing motorists loudly responded to a student placard that said, "Honk, if you're with us."

After two or three hours, the students disbanded. No bricks had been thrown, no blows exchanged, no arrests made. We hope any future demonstrations, if they occur, will be equally peaceful.

IT IS notable that after four years of the Scientologists' presence in Clearwater, nobody had picketed against them until this week.

When the protest came, it was carried out by students, rather than by businessmen, home-owners, taxpayers or other categories of adult citizens.

What that says about Clearwater, we're not sure. The least it says about our young people is that some of them care greatly about the

community and are willing to display their beliefs in public.

The Scientologists took photographs of the picketers and jotted down auto license numbers. We presume dossiers will be opened on all the identifiable students. It is a practice the cult members have carried out in the past. It has always struck us as a strange thing for supposedly religious people to do.

Whether the Scientologists will try to exact retribution on the picketers is uncertain. The picketers obviously had the courage to risk it. We wonder how many Clearwater adults would do likewise.

THE DEMONSTRATION had one hilarious aspect. It came when Nancy Reitze told the picketers they were giving Clearwater a bad image.

What a delicious irony, issuing from a spokeswoman for an outfit whose leaders—by their own recent admission—have committed burglary, conspiracy, theft and other felonies against the government. All this was in addition to the bare-knuckle, elbow-in-the-eye routine they gave to Clearwater four years ago when Scientology first arrived here.

We neither endorse or oppose the idea of further picketing of the Scientologists. What we do endorse is sustained civic outrage against the idea that Clearwater must be a permanent home for Scientology.

The pressure must be kept up against the cult until it decides to sell its property and depart, perhaps to an idyllic retreat similar to the temple the Hare Krishna sect has built in West Virginia.

On Wednesday the Clearwater High picketers struck a blow for free expression and for Clearwater. This newspaper commends the students, and we thank them.