



RYAN SODERLIN/DN

A RESPONSE to nude photographs of children in a book, Donna Bockoven's July bookstore outburst is credited by syndicated radio talk show host Randall Terry with inspiring a nationwide picket of Barnes & Noble Booksellers last weekend.

Vexed Vigilante?

Nude photographs develop crusade

BY BRET SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

As a day care provider and mother of four, Lincoln resident Donna Bockoven has made a life out of caring for children.

That quiet life has grown into a personal and public crusade against the national chain, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, the stock of which includes art photography books depicting nude children.

Calling it "obvious child pornography," Bockoven vows to fight.

"At some point in time we have to take a stand on something to believe in," Bockoven said. "This is my stand."

Dismissed by Lancaster County Attorney Gary Lacey as legal, the disputed photographs are now raising the ire of Nebraska Attorney General Don Stenberg, who wishes to rewrite state statutes to make such pictures punishable under child pornography laws.

Such censorship - says Matt Lemieux, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Nebraska - might be a violation of First Amendment rights and must be in alignment with decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court on the matter.

"While the state can regulate child pornography, it can not do it in a way that will sweep within protected speech," Lemieux said.

Bockoven's determination to get such art work outlawed is an example of an alarming trend in American politics, he said.

"What is disturbing is it seems like there is a vigilante censorship movement around the country," Lemieux said.

In the beginning

As a solo act of civil disobedience by an angry mother, Bockoven tore apart a photography book in the Lincoln Barnes & Noble, 5150 O St., on July 20. The campaign against the national chain continued last weekend with a nationwide picket promoted by the syndicated Christian radio program "Randall Terry Live" and organized by affiliated activist group, Loyal Opposition.

"The original impetus (for the nationwide picket) was Donna Bockoven," said Steve Wurth, program manager and spokesman for Loyal Opposition.

Last summer, Bockoven shocked fellow customers and outraged store management when she tore apart the book, "The Last Day of Summer," by Jock Sturges. Featuring photographs of naked adults, adolescents and children on the nude beaches of France, the 1993 collection has long

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been under fire by Christian groups denouncing the work as child pornography.

In fact, Bockoven said she first learned of Sturges and his work while listening to a program, "Focus on the Family," on local Christian radio station KLCV, 88.5 FM. The syndicated broadcast described Sturges' work and urged people to investigate local Barnes & Noble stores, which frequently carry the collections of Sturges and other photographers.

Motivated by the talk show, Bockoven said she confronted store management on the content of the art books. Feeling her comments were ignored by store employees, she tore the book apart in full view of several customers and employees, she said.

"I don't feel it's freedom of expression when it uses children," Bockoven said in August.

Employees at Barnes & Noble promptly called local authorities, who cited Bockoven for vandalism and forced her to pay for the damaged book.

But her outburst did not go unheeded. Although she received a citation by the Lincoln Police Department, the book was placed under an investigation headed by Sgt. Al Berndt of the Technical Division Team.

Do unto others?

Bob Condello, Barnes & Noble manager, said Bockoven's actions in the store were inexcusable and hardly Christian.

"She frightened my employees, and the customers were also scared," Condello said. "We have avenues that she could take in the government. Why attack your local bookstore? You have to go to the source; we are not the source for that book."

Meanwhile, Bockoven gained national recognition for her impassioned act in the aisles of Barnes & Noble.

Beginning with support from fellow church members and friends, Bockoven soon began receiving calls and mail from across Nebraska as

well as out of state. Talk began about the formation of a trust fund to pursue further action against the store and continue picketing and protesting.

Wurth said radio talk show host Randall Terry of "Randall Terry Live" - impressed by Bockoven's actions - encouraged his listeners to follow her lead: Enter your local Barnes & Noble and literally tear apart "The Last Day of Summer."

According to Wurth, Terry first read about Bockoven in a magazine. After speaking with her on the phone, he prompted his listeners to emulate her actions.

Many have. Following Bockoven's suit, activists from "California to New Hampshire" have engaged in similar protests, Wurth said. Until the national boycott, as many as 60 similar protests - either acts of vandalism or picketing - have occurred, none resulting in "serious" prosecution by local authorities, he said.

"No one has been forced to buy the book (after vandalizing it), and I don't know of anyone doing any serious jail time," he said.

But such tactics are harmful and absolutely illegal, Lemieux said.

"It violates the law," he said. "It is the destruction of somebody else's property."

Sowing the seeds

The list of disputed art work has grown from Sturges' "The Last Day of Summer" to include his two other pictorial collections as well as books by David Hamilton and Sally Mann.

Although Bockoven didn't take part in any of the protests promoted by Randall Terry, Wurth said her solo act of "courage" was the seed for the growing crusade.

"She directly started the national protest," he said. "It was her action that brought this to our attention, and from there and also 'Focus (on the Family)' it has taken national importance."

Entailing 50 U.S. cities, including Pittsburgh, New York and Omaha, the protest was "an absolute success," said Chris Finch, a Loyal Opposition volunteer.

In response to the recent dispute, Condello issued a formal statement outlining his store's policy about its role as a retailer.

"We do not feel that we have the right as a retailer to censor the reading taste of the public. We do however, in all cases, follow community standards as is expressed through federal, state and local legislation in regard to the products we sell and the contents of these products."

Please see BOOKS on 11