

Discounting Christmas

Department store's piano policy absurd

Sunny
side
up

with Jessica
Flanagain



"Jingle Bells, Something Smells, Von Maur laid an egg."

It's not even Thanksgiving yet, and Christmas carols are churning in the department stores, the merchandise displays are wrought with Jack and Jill in reindeer and snowflake cardigans, and sales associates are trying to shove candy canes down your throat.

If you long for the time when the holidays meant more than wrapping paper and Nine West, and you think this commission-driven Christmas spirit is hard to swallow — steer clear of Von Maur this holiday season.

Von Maur is Lincoln's newest department store, located in the SouthPointe Pavilion. It got its beginnings as a small family-owned business in a store front in Davenport, Iowa. One hundred and twenty-five years later, it is the largest privately-held retail store in Iowa and ranks in the top 50 fashion department stores in the country. Von Maur's headquarters are still located in Davenport. The store's management is dead set on taking the "Christ" out of Christmas.

That's right. Von Maur doesn't want any mention of baby Jesus in his manger, and no one is allowed to sing "glory to the new born king." This national chain with offices in Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Indiana and Minnesota prides itself on an attractive and relaxed environment to enhance your shopping experience.

To add to your capitalistic enjoyment, a pianist seated at a grand piano plays music during all store hours. Christmas music, now that Thanksgiving is in sight.

But not if the song makes any mention of Christ, Jesus or "God and sinner reconciled."

Von Maur pianists have been instructed to play Christmas tunes that don't have any religious connotation. If a customer should request, say, "Silent Night," they are supposed to tell their fans they don't know it. How about "Joy to the World"? Nope, they can't know that one either — by decree of management.

The piano player who told me about this order handed down by management wasn't very happy about it. Explaining that shoppers like traditional Christmas carols, this disgruntled musician said the rule was mean-spirited. The pianist also confided that there was nothing to be done and declined to talk about it any further for fear of being fired — employees are not supposed to talk about it.

What kind of place is this? Who feels the need to censor "Away in a Manger"?

So I called the store. I was patched through to Stephanie Olson, the human resources manager. I recounted the policy as I understood it and asked what the motivation behind it was.

"No comment," was her sharp reply.

"You won't comment on your piano policy?" I asked, befuddled.

"No, and if you pursue this (inquiry) further, or use my name and title, I'll take action," she said.

Take action?! What in the blazes! I just wanted to hear something more inspiring than "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" while I shopped.

I decided to try the Omaha Von Maur at Westroads and see what was going on. I asked if this was a policy in that store and if the reasoning behind the policy could be explained.

I was expecting the employees to simply explain that Christmas means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and they didn't want to step on any toes. Which is rather silly anyhow, since I can't imagine anyone

being offended by "Joy to the World."

But no. Not even a lame excuse in the pursuit of political correctness. They had me on hold for about half an hour and then decided not to comment. At least they didn't threaten me and were kind enough to direct me to their national headquarters.

Iowa is a friendly place, I thought as I called their home offices. I wanted to know if this was national Von Maur policy or if it was unique to Nebraska stores. I spoke with the Director of Advertising Jenifer Sautter and recounted my story with hopes that she could clue me in.

"I don't know," she said.

"Is there anyone there who does know? Is there some kind of piano policy?" I asked.

"I don't know." "Can you possibly find out?" I asked completely exasperated.

"Let me check, and if we want to comment, I'll call you back."

I called three more times and each time she was "unavailable" for comment.

JC Penney has live music at Christmas — well, actually it has a "player piano," and the owner of the piano performs occasionally. Their store manager indicated that it has not put restrictions on what Christmas tunes can and cannot be played.

So I went back to Von Maur. I requested "Joy to the World." Surprise, surprise. The pianist didn't know it. I requested "Silent Night," another surprise. So I asked the pianist if they'd been instructed not to play songs with references to Christ.

"I'm not allowed to comment" was the reply.

I finally got to speak with a different manager, Julie Finnegan. I told her my story and asked for some explanation. She started by telling me how Von Maur had an inviting environment and had been in business for a hundred and some-odd years — blah, blah, blah.

"That's all very interesting, but would you care to comment on your piano policy?" I asked.

Finnegan replied, "We like to appease all our customers. We don't want to exclude anyone. Are you writing about this? I hope you know our store doesn't approve."

Well, isn't that special. Von Maur doesn't want Christmas to be recognized as a Christian holiday, and it doesn't really want to talk about it, and it doesn't take kindly to anyone asking around about it. Just consider yourself appeased.

Keith Sheets, the manager at Dillards, reported that his store has live music only on occasion but played Christmas music throughout the store. He said the store plays a wide variety of music. When asked what he thought about the exclusion of music that mentioned Jesus, he said he couldn't speak for the store but gave his personal thoughts.

"Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but really — without the Christ, where do they think Christmas came from?"

The fact is that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. It's not a toy festival for

munchkins with pointy ears. It's not about candy canes dancing in children's heads. It's not a consumer jubilation. The spirit of giving — the Christmas spirit — is a reflection of God's grace in giving his only son to pay for the sins of humankind.

Appeasement is the absurd motivation for banning "Christ" from Christmas. I don't particularly like Von Maur's approach to public relations, and I think it's fishy that its managers have such a difficult time answering simple questions about store policy.

And if they don't want to exclude anyone, they've failed miserably. Christians everywhere are excluded when this store bars songs celebrating the birth of Jesus. This is still "one nation under God," and the money spent at Von Maur still says "in God we trust."

Please feel free to call Olsen with your Christmas greetings at 420-9100, or e-mail the national Von Maur Center at www.vonmaur.com.



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Making the same mistakes

Feminist movement must not follow male individualist track



Ever since I heard about the feminist movement, I have fully supported it. It's an idea that was long overdue. Women said, "We want to vote just like men." Well, right on, Sister, you should be allowed to vote. Women said, "We should have the same rights as men." Exactly.

I heard the rally, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people too." I could not have agreed more.

When Rush (is wrong) Limbaugh coined the term "Feminazi" for their views on abortion, I thought they'd take him to the fat farm or the funny farm, just so he would leave us alone.

There is no reason women shouldn't be treated the same as men. Test scores prove women are smarter than men, they mature faster, and they are less likely to be violent or in prison. There shouldn't have ever been a feminist movement; women always should have been treated equally.

But now as I look at a movement that in America has been the standard

of equality among people, I can't help but think that something in this movement has gone terribly, horribly wrong.

The cover of this month's issue of the AARP headlines features, "Women on the Rise, Some Make it Big, but Others Still Face the Glass Ceiling." The article praises women like Cynthia Trudell, vice president of General Motors; Carleton Fiorina, the head of Hewlett Packard; and Jill Barad of Mattell for making it big in a world where men rule.

While praising these women, the article goes on to point out that women still are facing salary discrimination. Sure, salary discrimination is unfair, and more women should be in leadership roles in major companies, but the problem lies elsewhere.

When we glorify women's success in the marketplace, we are glorifying the marketplace in which women have gotten ahead.

We are glorifying women who have somehow beaten the odds and "gotten ahead" as the capitalist motto has told them to do. So they have more money, so they can buy a bigger house, so they can buy a bigger television, so they can spend more money. So what?

In attempting to become equal with men in the marketplace, women will make the same mistakes men made a long time ago. They will join the movement to get ahead, the capitalist movement, the individualist move-

ment.

The individualist movement, a by-product of capitalism, is perhaps the worst thing ever to happen to this country. The movement puts the individual's success in front of and ahead of the goals of the family, the nation, the world. This is a movement men have followed for years — and America is feeling the effects.

As America's people are asking, "What's wrong with kids today?," America's social workers are asking, "Where the hell are the parents today?," and its kids ask, "Is anyone going to love me when I grow up?," we can only point to the failings of a flawed system.

Is it any coincidence that while America is obsessed with the workings of Microsoft and the stock market, the rate of nationally reported teen-age shootings has gone up?

While we are incensed with the ideas of working bigger hours to get bigger bucks, to buy bigger houses and more things, we are leaving our kids alone.

Isn't there a correlation between the number of single mothers in this country and the high rates of juvenile delinquency?

Yet the numbers are going to continue to climb. On Tuesday, the Omaha World-Herald reported that 41.5 percent of first-time births occurred out of wedlock. Conversely, social scientists

are saying that kids no longer need two positive adult influences in their lives; they need three.

So as fathers leave their children and women flock to work, who is charged with the responsibility of children? Lately that charge has been reluctantly laid on teachers, day-care workers, camp counselors and older siblings, many who do not have the time or know-how to give significant attention to each individual child.

Not only do children suffer from individualism but more so the individuals themselves.

In the push to get ahead, the individualist movement has lost sight of the deeper needs of sharing, personal sacrifice and love of other human beings.

As individualists put career and financial goals ahead of their own emotional needs, they become lost in a "get-ahead world" that cares nothing for them. Ever wondered about alcohol and drug abuse among supposedly successful people? Or maybe you should just watch an episode of "Ally McBeal."

But in order to achieve true sharing and true love, for that matter, a sacrifice of individual goals and achievements must be made. Love cannot survive when people bolt relationships over simple disagreements based on individual wants, lusts and desires.

Nor can it happen when brief

moments of individual happiness outweigh the gains of long-term commitments. Sacrifice exists not only in love but also within family. In order to raise a family in a way that complies in any way, shape or form with what psychology is telling us, then a sacrifice of individual and financial goals must be made.

Ever since the dawn of the feminist movement, it has been women who have been forced to make these sacrifices. And it is definitely true that men should make these sacrifices as much as women. The feminist movement is correct in stating that women should be on equal footing with men in all areas of life, but it makes a fatal mistake in following men down the road to get ahead ... the road of individualism.

If the feminist movement does not have foresight in its search for equality, then as a whole it will fail because it will only repeat the mistakes men have made.

But perhaps the feminist movement will stop and see the failures of the road it may travel. Maybe feminism still has a chance and can take a different road with better results at the end by solving and answering these, among other questions:

"What's wrong with these kids today?," "Where the hell are the parents?" and "Mom, who's gonna love me when I grow up?"

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