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What's made Dover unique?

Nation, world seek reasons this community became flashpoint for intelligent-design debate

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By LAURI LEBO
 Daily Record/Sunday News

DOVER - The Conewago Hills section of York County remains isolated, far back from the main roads.

People live here in houses of iron-rich red sandstone, 200-million-year-old sedimentary rock pulled from hard clay soil.

Life was hard here in this farming community, too, as evidenced by the area's gravestones. In a nearby family plot, under markers cut of the same sandstone, a 16-year-old mother lies next to her infant. The mother died in 1847, on the day her daughter was born. The little girl lived three months.

Last year, the Dover Area School District put the area on the international map by requiring, for the first time anywhere in the country, that biology students to be made aware of intelligent design.

As writers and researchers from as far away as Italy, Germany and Japan sat rapt for the past six weeks in a federal courtroom in Harrisburg, they asked, "So why here?"

But a Harrisburg courtroom can feel far away from the Conewago Hills, where you can still find hogmaw at church suppers. And, in a recent tongue-speaking revival, people testified to going further with God and to have been shaken over the mouths of hell, not once, not twice, but three times. Where two nationally known writers sat quietly in a back pew as a woman said that, yes, God saved her mother before taking her, and where, the woman is promised, he will yet save her children.

Dover is also a place in transition, where development is sneaking in, mostly on fertile limestone-rich farmland to the south and from the east, along the straighter back roads that provide the best access to the highway. Where Wal-Mart and Target are only a few minutes away, depending on the traffic.

Those from here know this, of course. But outsiders don't.

So the television cameras and the reporters with notebooks keep coming, showing up at the pizza shops and the diners and churches trying to find out who these people are.

Just as some people were obsessed with the trial and followed every detail

closely, others simply wanted it to go away. One Dover student wrote the Daily Record/Sunday News last month to say the attention of the media and this news story is spoiling his senior year.

In an expletive-filled rant, he said, "Find something better to do, and BITE ME."

Change

Some blame a clash of rural and suburban. Others say it's the revamping of state science standards.

But Dover, in many ways, is like other small towns.

"This could have happened in a number of places," said Judy McIlvaine, a candidate challenging school board incumbents in Tuesday's election.

All it takes, she said, is "a small group of people with an agenda."

"Somehow, we ended up on the front lines."

Nick Matzke has watched similar stories play out in other places. A science consultant and spokesman for the National Center for Science Education, he tracks challenges to the teaching of evolution.

The numbers are up, Matzke said. But that's hardly surprising. Recent polls say 40 to almost 50 percent of the public believe the biblical story of Genesis is life's literal blueprint. President Bush says he supports the teaching of intelligent design.

Yet the evidence is overwhelming, scientists say. The mechanics of evolutionary theory - natural selection and genetic mutation - are how we got here.

But history repeats itself, Matzke said. Intelligent design - the idea that the complexity of life demands a designer's guiding hand - is merely the latest incarnation of a court battle that has been waged by Christian fundamentalists since 1925 when William Jennings Bryan prosecuted John Scopes, a young football coach, for teaching evolution.

Matzke said most of the challenges have been in small towns in transition.

A recent lawsuit challenging stickers on biology books - which warn students that evolution is a theory, not fact - took place in a once-rural, now-fast-growing Atlanta suburb.

Improved state science standards requiring more emphasis on teaching evolution, Matzke said, might spur resistance.

Another reason might be a backlash against development and change, a way for people to hold on to the past. Then, newcomers move in, look at things differently. They're willing to challenge the way things have been done in the past.

Survival

On a warm Indian summer day, Matzke stopped along a central Pennsylvania hiking trail and examined the leaves of an American chestnut tree for signs of

blight.

At one point in this nation's history, it's said, an industrious squirrel could get from the East Coast to the Mississippi River without touching the ground, hopping on the branches of nothing but American chestnut trees. But blight discovered in New York in 1904 wiped out all of the native chestnut species. Old trees continue to sprout from their stumps, but the disease kills the branches before they can reproduce.

Today, botanists say they are close to bringing back the American chestnut, by crossing it with the Chinese chestnut, which carries the blight-resistant gene.

Matzke lives in California, but he has spent the past six weeks in Harrisburg, working on the case for the plaintiffs. This was the first time he had been able to spend time outside.

He suspects the people who espouse intelligent design and creationism spend little time in the woods. If they did, he said, they might see evolutionary processes at work, how each oak produces thousands of acorns every fall. And how it takes only one to survive to reproduce.

Gesturing to the canopy of trees, Matzke said it's survival of the fittest.

Purpose

But in the Conewago Hills, there are those who say life must have more meaning.

The Rev. Ed Rowand, appointed to the school board a year ago after the curriculum change, has lived here for 11 years.

He believes that, without God, we have no direction and no purpose. Rowand also believes the Earth is less than 10,000 years old and that a biblical flood is responsible for all the fossil remains.

Still, he said, intelligent design is not about creationism.

Now reporters show up in his church, Rohler's Assembly of God, on Sundays, looking for clues to this story playing out here. During a recent service, a writer with the New Republic sat in pew near the back, discreetly taking notes during the sermon.

That's just fine, Rowand said; all are welcome.

He has followed the trial closely, sitting in the courtroom on most days alongside some of his fellow board members.

There, his shoulders slump and his eyes are heavy-lidded. But in his church, he laughs easily. After the service, he snatched a squealing little boy, who shares his birthday, and playfully raised him over his head.

Here, Pastor Rowand is younger, more vibrant, speaking of Elijah and the false prophets, rather than wrestling with the evolution of man.

Later, sitting on the steps of his church and looking out into an autumn gold-swept pasture, he said he has lived many places, in communities much like here.

He doesn't see Dover as being different from other small towns. So he doesn't understand why 11 parents would sue the district over something that was already being done, both in Dover and elsewhere.

Students were already being told informally in science class there were alternative theories like creationism, just as, truthfully, students are told that in science classes across the country.

What led to the lawsuit, Rowand said, is that board members put it in writing.

Last week, a Dover biology teacher testified he used to start his unit on evolutionary theory by drawing a line on the chalkboard. On one side of the line, he wrote "creationism." On the other side, he wrote "evolution."

Robert Linker once told his students that, while there might be other ideas about how we got here, it was his job to teach them only one.

Now, Dover's teachers stick to teaching out of the textbook.

While this nation's founders created the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights to protect the civil liberties of all citizens, Rowand sees the issue as majority rule. And he believes a majority in the school district favor the short statement read to biology students telling them about intelligent design. A majority of this nation's citizens also support teaching it, he said, pointing to poll numbers.

For the past six weeks, U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III has sat and listened to this story. Now, Dover waits for his decision, one that will likely not come until the end of the year.

Rowand has grown tired. After spending the day in court and campaigning on weekends for the school board election, he has little time to write his sermons.

Sometimes he catches himself wishing the board could take it all back. Not because board members were wrong - they weren't, he believes - but because it has come to this.

He said board members tried to do the right thing. But now, if the judge rules against them, they will have gone from a district where creationism was once mentioned in science class to one that can't even talk about intelligent design.

Challenge

Friday, the trial completed, camera crews forced attorneys up against the doors of the federal courthouse building. On the steps, scientists posed for pictures with a puppet panda, a reference to a pro-intelligent-design book. International news crews, searching for sound bites, interviewed local media. Several plaintiffs watched the throng, looking slightly dazed. Board members avoided the media glare, leaving by the back door.

Later, after the camera crews drifted away and other attorneys wandered off, searching for a drink and a place to unwind, Dover's attorney Robert Muise huddled with a few remaining reporters, still arguing the case.

Despite days of testimony on the subject, he continued to talk about the bacterial flagellum - a common theme throughout the trial - and what he believes is its irreducibly complex nature.

A member of the Thomas More Law Firm, he talked about how he has visited school districts in other states, discussing with them possible lawsuits over intelligent design.

Muise once spoke with a school board in West Virginia about using the pro-intelligent-design book "Of Pandas and People," a book he credits with getting him interested in the evolution debate.

But board members there decided against it.

He believes what makes Dover different is that its board members stood up to outsiders.

"They didn't want to fold," Muise said.

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