



FIRST-PERSON: Creating culture warriors

By Penna Dexter
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DALLAS (BP)--A recent Newsweek story describes the emphasis evangelical universities are placing on training debaters. The debate team at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., ranks number one in the nation. (Harvard is number 14.)

Its success stems from Jerry Falwell's vision to turn out debaters who become "the conscience of the culture." These young culture warriors are gaining the skills to become lawyers and leaders who will take on what Dr. Falwell calls the "moral default on the other side." One of Liberty's freshman debaters, Cole Bender, defines his dream: "I think I can make an impact in the field of law on abortion and gay rights, to get back to Americans' godly heritage."



Penna Dexter

Where do kids like this come from? The statistics on the worldview of most Christian kids are pretty depressing. Dan Smithwick, founder of the Nehemiah Institute, has been studying this for years. His PEERS testing shows that, irrespective of whether they attend public or Christian schools, the opinions of Christian students on social issues are being shaped primarily from a secular humanist or socialist perspective. The Liberty University culture warriors are not typical products of our education system -- even our Christian high schools. The sad fact is many Christian kids walk away from their faith when they hit college.

This reality is behind the creation of a new position at a Christian school in Plano, Texas. Dan Panetti serves as Prestonwood Christian Academy's worldview director. Dan has spent his career informing Christians about the social/moral issues that face America and encouraging believers to be involved in the political arena. He has used his law degree as a tool in his work battling a sexualized culture. He's found his passion -- the next generation -- and he works in the thick of it at PCA where kids in grades 9 through 12 are free to come into his office to discuss issues that run the gamut, from "same sex marriage" to personal dating concerns. The question Dan teaches these students to answer is, "How does my Christianity apply to real life issues?"

What these kids won't get from Dan is pat "Christian" answers. This hip father of four uses these spontaneous discussions and more formal teaching sessions to encourage PCA students to use biblical principles to make life decisions. And he develops programs to teach them how to formulate complex answers to the moral questions that face the culture. Dan tells students that, to engage the world, you don't quote Bible verses; you bring the facts to bear with thoughtful, biblically informed arguments.

PCA's emphasis on shaping students' worldview did not begin with Dan Panetti. Headmaster Larry Taylor established the Student Leadership Institute to prepare students to be leaders in the culture. Many of the kids from this affluent community will become doctors, lawyers, broadcasters, educators and business leaders. Taylor and Panetti seek to provide them with tools to combine with their professional knowledge and stature to bring a Christian influence to the nation's societal institutions.

Dan Panetti understands that, to most teens, relationships are "everything." A strong Christian

worldview grows from relationships with older adults who are willing and equipped to compassionately and lovingly help a young person to explore how his faith shapes his role in the world. Part of Dan's task is to "influence the influences" on PCA students. He makes suggestions for coursework at PCA and aids in the selection of materials. He organizes worldview training for teachers. Together, PCA's upper school staff members have studied Paul Little's "Know What You Believe." Soon, they'll read and discuss Nancy Pearcey's "Total Truth." At least 50 percent of textbooks used in most Christian schools are no different than those used in public schools. So it's the teacher that makes the difference. PCA is also developing a "Parent University" to sync up parents and school. And Dan stays in touch with PCA alumni. PCA is launching an online publication to provide encouragement and information for college students facing challenges to their faith and Christian principles.

There's no silver bullet to ensuring Christian students develop a strong biblical worldview. But if there was one, Dan Panetti thinks it would be reading. "In a high tech world, most people don't read," he laments. Dan talks a lot about books. He helps choose the books in PCA's library and often hands a student a book off the shelf in his office. Sometimes there's fruitful discussion when the book is returned. On other occasions, there's a twinkly-eyed scolding. "Each student is different," he says. And each one is worth the effort.

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Dexter is a conservative activist and an announcer on the new syndicated radio program "Life on the Line" (information available at www.lifeontheline.com). She currently serves as a consultant for KMA Direct Communications in Plano, Texas, and as a producer for "Washington Watch Weekly," a broadcast of the Family Research Council. She formerly was a co-host of Marlin Maddoux's "Point of View" syndicated radio program.

[[Back to Previous Page](#)]