

In Your Face

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Carleton

University was right to stop five students from displaying photos of aborted fetuses at a recent demonstration held by pro-life group Operation Lifeline.

The students were arrested for trespassing after distributing the material on campus. They had applied for permission to put up the display two months ago but were turned down by the university, citing the offensiveness of the material.

The issue here is not whether they were within their rights to do so, or whether the college acted rashly. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees them that liberty, and the college acted because had they not, they would have involuntarily been seen as supporting this gruesome protest.

In this instance, free speech exercised in protest crossed the line, becoming an attack rather than a debate.

It is one thing for anti-abortionists to shout their views on the streets, but visually forcing people who wanted nothing to do with their cause, a highly divisive moral and religious issue, into witnessing such disturbing material, justified the university's actions. These signs were designed to provoke without restraint, compassion or empathy for the people being forced, knowingly or otherwise, to participate. The students could have found another way to express their opposition without infringing on the rights of others.

This justification is perfectly illustrated by the emotional toll those graphic signs took on a girl who recently spoke with the Times.

A few days

ago, we learned of a 21-year-old girl who, while she was on her way her to work, exited the bus only to be confronted by a gruesome sight. Anti-abortion protesters had created signs featuring graphic pictures of bloody fetuses. Aside from the obvious uncomfortable reactions any individual would have when confronted with this kind of imagery, the implications of this exercise in freedom of expression stood out for another, more personal reason.

She had an abortion
eight months earlier.

'Seeing
that sign was the most violent experience of my life, and there was no physical contact whatsoever,' she explained.

When personal ideologies are disguised as
protest in the public eye, especially in such a blatant and irresponsible way,
they can have devastating effects, for people on both sides of the debate.

Protesters

who take their rhetoric to extremes in the way these students did may get the publicity they seek, but in doing so they often marginalize and offend innocent people.

Their

sensationalist actions become the focus, discouraging rational debate and often dissuading any moderates who may have been open to their movement's ideas otherwise.

Protests

are supposed to be a means of encouraging discussion to serve the greater good of society, not to be used as a mouth-piece for the distribution of shock value and anonymous emotional assault.

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University recognized this and acted accordingly. Their authority as the governing body of the students allows them to decide what material they allow to be displayed on their property. The group was warned of their limitations and chose to ignore them, causing offense; and in the case of the individual who spoke with us, and many other voiceless women, emotional turmoil.

They were

rightfully reprimanded.