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November 17, 2003

Religion, free speech debate sparks in Frisco

Christine McManus

November 8, 2003

FRISCO - God told Donna Drebenstedt to open the A&W Restaurant on Summit Boulevard and now A&W corporate officials are telling her to take Him off the menu.

A debate over the First Amendment, freedom of religion, root beer and corporate control over local franchise operators has arisen in Frisco.

When the owners of the A&W restaurant on Summit Boulevard near Interstate 70 left their highway sign blank the past couple weeks, people wondered whether the 30-year-old business had closed.

For several years, the 30-foot-tall A&W sign always had New Testament Bible quotes posted. This week the sign reads merely "open."

"We were going to post the message, 'Why was this sign blank last week?' but we chose not to get into that," said Donna Drebenstedt, who owns and operates the restaurant with her husband Reuben Drebenstedt, a Messianic Jewish pastor.

The primary difference between Jews and Messianic Jews is rooted in their basic interpretations of Jesus. Messianic Jews believe Jesus was a son of God, a messiah. Jewish people do not.

Last month, the Drebenstedts received a letter from attorneys at A&W corporate headquarters in Kentucky. The letter said the restaurant owners had 30 days to remove all Bible references from the sign.

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A&W corporate attorneys recently asked Frisco restaurant owners Reuben and Donna Drebenstedt to stop posting New Testament Bible verses on the sign in front of the Summit Boulevard restaurant.

The couple is complying for now, but they plan to eventually replace the quotes on the sign.

Summit Daily/Kara K. Pearson

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Exactly 30 days after the letter arrived, the Drebenstedt's employees took the most recent Bible quote down. Inside the restaurant, however, pamphlets and publications with information about Jewish Messianic Christianity remain available for customers.

"We're not going to give up our Constitutional and religious freedoms," Reuben Drebenstedt said. "I don't make my living selling hamburgers, that's just an aside to why I am here. It's not just about the money. This is God's restaurant."

The Drebenstedts own the building and the land. Every month, they pay the A&W Corp. for the right to use the brand name and products.

Eventually the Drebenstedts will put the quotes back up again, they said.

Out of respect for A&W officials, the Drebenstedts pulled the quotes down to show they understood A&W meant business. The couple said they see it as a cooling-off time, a time of thought necessary after any heated argument or discussion, especially when attorneys are involved.

"Four years ago we nearly sold the building after evicting a dishonest tenant. But then God told us we should keep the restaurant open," said Donna Drebenstedt. "We didn't really even want to, but God told us it would take care of His needs and ours.

"It wouldn't be any fun to run it without God."

The Frisco A&W is different in many ways from other A&Ws across the nation. None of the differences, said Reuben Drebenstedt, are prohibited in the franchise agreement.

There are curtains on the windows. A bird-feeder hangs out front near an evergreen tree.

Construction workers from the site next door trickle in throughout the afternoon for a complimentary cup of hot chocolate.

Once in a while, customers who are down on their luck ask for a free hot meal when they have no money and no where else to go.

A little shelf in the dining area displays flags representing the nationalities of past and present employees.

There are magazine racks and several copies of local newspapers. And there are complimentary newsletters, pamphlets and books about Jewish Messianic Christians. Copies of The Jewish News and Jerusalem Post are also available.

On several occasions during the past year, people have come into the restaurant to complain.

Some Jewish people in the community reportedly have felt offended by the Bible quotes on the sign. Several locals complained to both the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and A&W corporate leaders.

A statement on the Anti-Defamation League Web site by national director Abraham H. Foxman this summer said some Jewish Messianic groups, "falsely claim that they are interested in Jewish practices when the real goal is to convert Jews to Christianity."

"The question we've raised is, does the business fall under the laws regarding public accommodation," said Evan Zuckerman, associate director of the Mountain States Regional Office of the ADL. "We are also concerned for the rights of the employees who work there."

Synagogue of the Summit president Heidi Dickstein said she knew Messianic Jews owned the A&W, but was surprised about the complaints.

"Without knowing too many of the details, it sounds like there's no defamation going on here," Dickstein said. "We've certainly noticed the Bible quotes, but most of the people I know have mostly just giggled over them. They have the freedom of speech and freedom of religion, just like everyone else in this country."

As a religious minority, Dickstein said, sometimes Jewish people can become sensitive, even oversensitive, to comments about their beliefs. But they learn to deal with them and teach tolerance and patience to their children, Dickstein said.

"We as Jews see evangelism as a sin, but we will support to the ends of the Earth the Messianic Jewish people's rights guaranteeing their freedom of religion and their freedom of speech," Dickstein said.

The Drebenstedts said many customers and friends from around the world support them.

Copies of the correspondence among complaining customers, the Anti-Defamation League and the A&W Corporation in Kentucky were not provided by the Drebenstedts, the ADL or A&W.

"We're in the restaurant business. We sell hamburgers and hot dogs and don't want to offend any of our customers, and we expect the same from our franchisees," said A&W spokeswoman Virginia Ferguson.

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HASHEM, INC. dba A & W Root Beer
861 N. Summit Blvd. Frisco, CO 80443
Mailing address: 393 S. Ivy St., CO 80246

יהוה Psalm 1 

*Hope you remember visiting us.
We have a need for your prayer
on the other side.*



HASHEM, INC. dba A & W Root Beer
861 N. Summit Blvd. Frisco, CO 80443
Reuben & Donna Drebenstedt, owners
970-668-8369 Fax 970-668-8816
Mailing address: P.O. Box 460034 Glendale, CO 80246
E-mail: hashem@hasheminc.com
יהוה Psalm 1 

**IF YOU WANT TO MAKE A COMMENT TO
A & W CORPORATION PLEASE
E-MAIL THEM AT:
www.awrestaurants.com and/or
Phone:1-866-456-2929 Fax:1-502-874-8183
Address: A & W Restaurants P.O. Box 32300
Louisville, KY 40232-9953
Sending us a copy is appreciated. Thanks!
God bless you! Numbers 6:24-26**

we do not stop putting Bible verses on our sign. Your prayers and support is appreciated. May God stop this action. Thank you! *Reuben & Donna*

October 20, 2003

Shalom friend,

Recently you signed a petition at our restaurant standing with us against some people striving to take action to stop our way of doing business. *Specifically to stop our proclaiming the things of God and our dedication of this business, building and land to Him.* We have been threatened by A & W Corporation that they will take away our franchise if

Shalom friend,

You are sent a copy of a post card recently sent out to people who came to our ministry restaurant because I believe you would like to know of the attack against this **MENORAH** -Menorah Ministries- affiliated ministry. I appreciate your prayers and any response. **We believe this is infringing on our constitutional civil and religious rights.** Unfortunately we have had to stop our signage ministry while pursuing the legalities of this matter. This whole matter came about due to unbelieving (non Christian) Jewish pressure against us. In His service, Reuben

For I am not ashamed of the Good News, since it is God's powerful means of bringing salvation to everyone who keeps on trusting, to the Jew especially, but equally to the Gentile. Romans 1:16