

## A Celebrated Sneeze

A compelling incident took place on May 20, 2001, during commencement exercises at Washington Community High School in Washington, Ill.

With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, the family of Natasha Appenheimer, that year's valedictorian, brought a lawsuit to prevent the inclusion of the invocation and benediction traditionally given at the school's commencement ceremony. The suit was decided in favor of the Appenheimers when, three days before the ceremony, the court handed down a temporary injunction barring the inclusion of the prayers on the basis of their having been deemed "school sponsored" (and thereby an unconstitutional violation of the first amendment's "establishment clause").

"I am a Christian and a believer," Chief U.S. District Judge Joe B. McDade said before announcing his decision, "but in this country, a nonbeliever has more rights than a believer."

Though the school had said it would contest the ruling that barred it from sponsoring prayer at its graduation ceremonies, it dropped such plans in July 2001 once it came to some estimate of how much such a legal battle might cost.

People were angered by the decision, which overturned a tradition of 80 years' standing at Washington Community High. Many found unique ways of protesting the judge's ruling. Before the ceremony, students organized a prayer vigil around the school's flagpole. Some 50 seniors clasped hands in a circle while about 150 underclassmen and members of the community encircled them.



Yet it was the act of Ryan Brown – a member of the graduating class who was scheduled to give a speech during the event – that is celebrated. As his form of protest, he had worked it out with a handful of friends that when he faked a sneeze at the podium, they were to cry out "God bless you!"

The plan was carried out as envisioned, with everyone who had been in on it playing their assigned parts. Brown also made another protest on his way to the podium; he stopped to bow in silent prayer, an act that prompted the audience to stand and applaud. He replied to the crowd, "Don't applaud for me, applaud for God."

What a creative plan to invoke God's blessing on a ceremony that launched the high school seniors into their future – the "commencement" of their lives after high school.

And wherever he may be now, we add our own "God bless you" to Ryan Brown.