

## TEACHING COUPLE FIRED FOR NOT ATTENDING CHRISTMAS EVENT: WE ARE TEACHERS NOT CRUSADERS, SAY COUPLE



It is strange, not to say amazing, how religion plays such a decisive role in the lives of many workers, so much so that they are willing to risk losing their jobs, to follow the religious dictates to the last comma and full-stop. Kristine and Gerardo Rosales, elementary school teachers at the Orange River Elementary in Fort Myers, Fla., informed their Principal Holly Bell that they would not be attending a compulsory school event celebrating Christmas, two years back in 2010, as the religion they followed, Jehovah's Witnesses, prohibited them from marking the holiday. The couple was well aware that the event was mandatory and the principal had cautioned the faculty against skipping the event. The couple claims that the principal ordered everyone to be present saying, "I don't care what religion you are." The teachers, since being hired in 2008, were working on a year-to-year contact as they had not been granted tenure. The couple was then informed that their contract was not being renewed for the school academic year 2011-12. The Rosales filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which in turn, filed a lawsuit on the couple's behalf on Aug. 20 in U.S. District Court alleging religious discrimination. According to the 1964 Civil Rights Act employers can ask employees not to wear something according to their religious dictates or prevent them from observing religious mandates, only if, they can prove that allowing them to do so, will cause undue hardship on the conduct of the employer's business. In their lawsuit, the couple contends that there was no truth in the company's contention that Gerardo was not being rehired because there was a "reduction in force." Their lawyer, Paul Reid, said that his client's reluctance to participate in the Christmas event was not because they were objecting to anyone or the students participating in a religious event. They felt that they were not crusaders and would just like to be allowed to do their job, which is to teach. The lawyer said that since they lost their teaching jobs, they were looking for another teaching job, biding their time "doing odd jobs," till they could find one. Leave alone the legal tangle they find themselves in, having a Christmas event in the school would itself be against the law. American Civil Liberties Union, Richard Bilbao said, "Public schools should not be holding religious events, much less compulsory ones, much less ones in which faculty are forced to attend." To make matters worse for the school management is that the couple received positive performance reviews ever since they began working as teachers at Orange River School. Rosaleses in their lawsuit allege that Principal Bell's attitude to them changed after she came to know that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, following their seeking a one-day leave to attend a Jehovah's Witness convention. Their relationship deteriorated to such an extent that Bell did not even deign to respond to the email in which the Rosaleses has clarified why they would be unable to attend the event. The lawsuit further contends that Bell has consistently refused to "engage in any consequential communication or interaction." The school district declined to comment, citing policy which prohibited commenting on pending litigation. However, they did say that Bell continues to be at her post as the principal of the school.

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