

Dave Hyzy: Teens need to know appearance matters

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When I attended high school, back in the early '70s, I was very active in a student movement to ease or repeal the dress code. Dress shirts, pants and shoes were still required for going to school in those days. We were lucky we weren't required to wear ties.

As children of the '60s, we engaged in many forms of protest to make our case. Incrementally, and over time, we eventually prevailed. My parents didn't live long enough to hear me say it, but boy were we wrong!

The "fruits" of that victory are everywhere; the transformation having taken place in society as a whole. The distinction between formal and casual has been blurred to the point of irrelevance. Casual Fridays? As opposed to what, Mediocre Mondays?

In this age of libertarian narcissism, the right to self-expression seems to have triumphed over common sense. A recent experience illustrates my point.

A picture from this year's Memorial Day parade grabbed my attention. There, among the marchers, was my old high school's marching band. However, unlike the other bands, members marched without uniforms, in jeans, shorts and flip-flops. I was struck by the ragtag nature of their appearance, so out of step with the other uniformed marchers in the parade.

My initial feeling was one of anger at the district for being too cheap to provide the band with uniforms. I felt that it wasn't fair to force the students to march without uniforms; the football team certainly has uniforms. I felt this reflected poorly on the students and the school district.

I pondered how to best vent my frustration, and decided to post my thoughts on a Facebook page, frequented by people who grew up in my town. I was initially gratified by the response. Many people posted comments expressing solidarity with my view. I was glad to see that my reaction had not just been that of some "old-timer." Then the dam burst.

Out poured the impassioned views of parents and teachers, whose basic message was: Why are you picking on the kids? They are doing the best they can! The fact that my gripe was with the School Board was ignored. It was further pointed out that they weren't actually a marching band at all, the district having abolished such a "frivolity" years ago. This should have been a point of solidarity against the common foe of the board, but sadly reasoned discourse had left the building.

Righteous indignity and charges of class warfare followed when it was suggested that perhaps the band members could at least have dressed alike, so they would have resembled a cohesive band unit. Parents and teachers reacted sarcastically to the notion that today's teenagers be told to dress alike, and further remarked it would be an undue hardship on some families to provide a pair of matching pants.

It is these reactions that had me thinking of the protests to remove the dress code at school. I am certainly not arguing for a return to the rigid conformity of the 1950s. But it seems like the pendulum may have swung too far toward the other extreme when parents and teachers are making excuses for slovenliness.

In the real world, people are judged by their appearance. To pretend otherwise does a disservice to the students and robs them of a valuable learning experience.