

# The Miami Student

## **Students for Life at Miami Hamilton suing for alleged First Amendment violations**

By Asst. News Editor Jake Gold

Students for Life at Miami University's Hamilton campus, along with the religious legal advocacy organization Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), are suing the school over alleged discrimination and infringement of First Amendment rights.

Students for Life, whose national website declares their mission as “abolish[ing] abortion in our lifetime,” was organizing its fourth annual “Cemetery of the Innocents” demonstration when the university's Director of Student Activities and Orientation, Caitlin Borges, informed the group that they must put up informational signs across campus to notify community members of the display, according to the lawsuit filed Wednesday.

Borges suggested the signs say something like, “The Students for Life are displaying their annual Cross Display from October 29th–November 5th. Please contact Ellie Wittman with questions,” according to the lawsuit.

The Cemetery of the Innocents display places crosses on the university's Central Quad to “represent the lives lost to abortion,” the lawsuit states.

Borges feared that the display could cause “emotional trauma” for those not expecting the exhibit, while Wittman, the president of the Hamilton campus' Students for Life chapter, feared that the signs would lessen the exhibit's impact.

Wittman rejected the proposal from Borges, saying it would “interfere with the purpose of the Cemetery of the Innocents display,” the lawsuit says. She recalls that in November 2016, when Miami University Hamilton Pride — a self-described “LGBTQIA+ and ALLY organization for promoting social justice and equality for everyone along the gender and sexuality spectrum” — showed a similar display for the Transgender Day of Remembrance, it was not required to place any signs identifying MUH Pride as the sponsoring organization or providing contact information.

“This display could have caused some individuals to experience ‘emotional trauma’ upon seeing it, just as Defendant Borges and Haverkos feared would happen with the Cemetery of the Innocents display,” the lawsuit says.

“No university official has the authority to censor student speech simply because of how someone might respond to it,” wrote ADF Legal Counsel Travis Barham in a press release. “Like all government officials, public university administrators have an obligation to respect students’ free speech rights. The First Amendment secures the freedom of all students to participate in the marketplace of ideas, and it prohibits university officials from imposing trigger warnings that restrict what some students can say to spare the feelings of others.”

Claire Wagner, spokeswoman for Miami, said that the university respects its students’ right to free speech.

“This lawsuit appears to be the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding at Miami University’s Hamilton campus,” Wagner said in an email. “The University does not approve or disapprove of any student organization’s display based on content or subject matter. Miami University does not require trigger warnings. “Our values dictate that we protect the rights of our students and student organizations to hold and express disparate beliefs and we encourage the discussion and learning that comes from sharing our differences,” Wagner added. “If mistakes were made, they will be addressed.”

ADF, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based group founded in 2014, aims to “defend religious freedom before it [is] too late,” according to its website. The Christian legal advocacy and training group also lists “sanctity of life” and “marriage and family” as core issues.

It is currently representing Colorado cake artist Jack Phillips in a U.S. Supreme Court case. In 2012, Phillips declined to design a wedding cake for a same-sex couple.

ADF is also listed by the Southern Press Law Center as a hate group, and according to the SPLC website “has supported the recriminalization of homosexuality in the U.S. and criminalization abroad; has defended state-sanctioned sterilization of trans people abroad; has linked homosexuality to pedophilia and claims that a ‘homosexual agenda’ will destroy Christianity and society.”

Borges declined to comment on the lawsuit.

*Additional reporting by Kirby Davis and Megan Zahneis.*