

## ISSUES

# An Open Letter To Principal Maguire, Who Cancelled Her School's Homecoming Dance For Fear Of Twerking

*My high school didn't allow dancing either, but we didn't blame Miley Cyrus.*

KELLI DUNHAM · SEP 9, 2014

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Dear Ms. Maguire:

It's been a rough few weeks hasn't it? You would think that the principal of a small town high school -- Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, VT, to be exact -- could [cancel a homecoming dance](#) without having to defend the decision to the entire outraged country. But unfortunately for you, the Internet exists and we all want to weigh in. All 314 million of us.

This is not a shaming letter, my friend, but as an adult who existed in an Enforced Non Dancing Environment (ENDE) during my formative years, it is my duty to inform you of the consequences. This experience left me with lasting scars. And people who have had to co-exist in an environment that involves both me and music? They are equally as scarred.

Or at least scared.

Let's begin by addressing [your letter to the Bennington Banner](#), in which you described why the dance was canceled:

*Over the past couple of years, since Miley Cyrus took the stage "twerking" at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, our students' dancing behavior has crossed the line of what we can condone as appropriate behavior at a school. Twerking is dancing to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving a low squatting stance and thrusting movements.*

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Sigh. I suppose by now you know that no adult has ever successfully described the physical actions of the dancing behavior of teenagers without becoming a laughing stock amongst said teenagers? Also, if you wanted to cancel the dance because of twerking, perhaps you could have made mention of cultural appropriation. This, frankly would have been my argument since only 1.2 percent of your student body, assuming it is the same demographic of the town where the school is located, belongs to the culture from which twerking has been stolen. And "Miley Cyrus did it first" isn't actually as good an excuse as folks think it is.

Principal Maguire, did you really have to post on Facebook: "This is nothing like 'Footloose,' this is a safety concern for us." Has no one told you? Much like "Fight Club," the first rule of creating a situation like the movie "Footloose" is don't talk about the movie "Footloose."

Perhaps you're being entirely too literal, Ms. Maguire. This is not a precise comparison; no one thinks "Footloose" is a documentary. Those kids had lived in an ENDE for close to a decade. We know that giving them access to a converted feed plant decorated with balloons and filled with confetti would not instantly convert them into professional-level dancers. Not even with Kevin Bacon yelling "Let's dance!" in an extremely enthusiastic manner.

But all this botched public relations is in the past. Let's have a heart to heart about why you really don't want to make your town into an ENDE.

I went to a small Christian high school that forbid -- amongst many other things -- dancing. The tender loving care of the teachers at the school saved me from many things, but not from being a Big Huge Public Bulldyke. This makes some of them very sad. In addition to their anti-dance policies, they also taught us civics from Bob Jones University textbooks, outlawed parachute pants and during my senior year made a rule which forbade "flannel shirts on women." Which, come to think of it, is probably something they added to the student handbook just for me.

Because I spent my adolescence in an ENDE, Ms Maguire, I never learned to dance. Not even a little bit. Not even as a hobby. This is difficult for most people to understand, which is probably why my Very First Gay Friend thought going to an iconic lesbian club in the 1990s would be an excellent Very First Gay Outing for me.

Techno music blared from the speakers and my friend dragged me onto the floor, insisting that "everyone can dance." I scanned my mental Rolodex (it was the '90s; perhaps I scanned my mental Palm Pilot) for equivalent experiences and landed on the kids from the Peanuts cartoons and how they moved. I stuck out my arms, straight, moved my feet up and down in one place and swivelled my head from side to side. Very sexy. If you ever want to go five years without getting laid, Ms Maguire, I suggest you do the Snoopy Dance in an iconic New York City lesbian bar in the 1990s. I can guarantee it will work, 100 percent.



*The author, demonstrating the start of the Snoopy Dance, c. 2006, Portland Oregon.*

Later when I started my comedy career, I returned to my home state to perform at Lacrosse, Wisconsin Gay Pride. The drag queens there were both extremely tough (they made fun of one of the other queens for crying at the funeral of a friend who was killed in a hate crime) and extremely maternal. When I was done performing, I sat on a bench in the Oktoberfest-Grounds-turned-gay-disco, waiting for my ride to the hotel as the beat of "Please Don't Stop the Music" throbbed through my brain and leaked into my spinal cord. I was almost in tears, wishing beyond all hope, "No, please do stop the music. Please do."

One of the tough/maternal queens grabbed my arm like she was marching me into an enforced time out and maneuvered me onto the concrete slab that had become the dance floor.

"Everyone can dance," she said.

After 20 minutes of the impromptu nonconsensual lesson, she gave up.

"I guess it's not for everyone," she sighed, "usually I just tell people if they can listen to the drum, they can dance. But you..." Another long sigh. "...You were trying to dance to all the instruments."

A year later, I answered an audition notice for cabaret performers. I did a few minutes of my stand-up act for two industry folks in a small room. The In-Charge Dude looked up from his notes long enough to ask if I could "move." Being a relative newcomer to theater auditions I didn't understand what was meant by that particular word. If you're unfamiliar, Ms. Maguire, it's another word for "dance."

I nodded enthusiastically, "of course" and was ushered past a curtain and onto a stage full of thin muscular people in leotards and leg warmers, all of them in various states of stretching. A scowling man with a clipboard, who I now know was a Very Famous New York Choreographer, occupied one of the hundreds of seats in the theater facing us. It was an audition scene, Ms. Maguire, straight out of "A Chorus Line."

There was counting, the music started and I had no other choice but to try and follow the movements the others were making. Within seconds I had knocked over a male dancer who had the grave misfortune of dancing next to me. The Very Famous New York Choreographer yelled "Stop stop stop!" and then "What on earth do you think you are doing?" as he threw his papers in the air.

Ms. Maguire, have you ever experienced the angry condescension of a Very Famous New York Choreographer whose time you have wasted by flailing about his audition like a sea mammal caught in a fishing net? I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. I wouldn't even wish it on the Very Famous New York Choreographer.

Maybe if the folks at my small Christian high school had let me dance with boys so I could get (their words) "all hot and bothered" they could have kept me straight a little longer and they wouldn't have had to make that rule about flannel shirts.

Or perhaps not.

But I certainly wouldn't mind having the body confidence that comes with a lifetime of social dancing. And fewer embarrassing stories.

So, Ms. Maguire, I know you're concerned about safety, and I hope you're concerned about cultural appropriation but I bet small town principals know a thing or two about a creative workaround. Please don't make your school into an Enforced No Dancing Environment. Please save your students from a lifetime of humiliation.

Let them dance, Ms. Maguire. Let them dance.

Read more from [Kelli Dunham](#).

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