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Lebo's front-row seat at modern 'monkey' trial

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The Board of Education in tiny Dover, Pa., earned a dubious distinction in 2004, becoming the first public district to require teachers to introduce religion while casting doubt on evolution.

Although Christianity is serious business in Dover, the idea of supplanting science with religion angered many parents. So, in 2005 - with the ACLU and the National Center for Science Education in Oakland - some parents sued to stop the religious requirement. The epic First Amendment case was *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District*.

One reporter covering the case was Lauri Lebo, who grew up near the town of about 2,000 and wrote for the local York Daily Record. In her new book, Lebo not only explains the best public defense of evolution since the Scopes "Monkey" trial of 1925, but she also shows how the issue divided the town - and threatened her own relationship with her evangelical father.

Lebo's book is "The Devil in Dover: An Insider's Story of Dogma v. Darwin in Small-Town America."

Q: This case centers on intelligent design. What is that?

A: Intelligent design is revamped creationism, the idea that life is so complex that it demands a guiding hand.

Q: What did the school board require teachers to do?

A: They had crafted a four-paragraph statement to be read to students that raised questions about evolution, said it was not a fact and that there are other theories of how we've gotten here, including intelligent design. Then students were referred to a textbook in the library. The students were never allowed to ask questions. The teachers refused (to comply), and the administrator read the statement.

Q: The U.S. Supreme Court has outlawed teaching creationism in public school. Why did the school board think it could get away with intelligent design?

A: They were getting help from the Thomas More Law Center, (which) pledges to be the "sword and shield" for Christians. The district's attorney said, "You can't do this - you've been talking about

creationism - and that you are motivated by religion is quite clear." The brazenness of what the school board was doing was amazing. The goal was to take this case to the Supreme Court.

Q: You're saying they pretended it wasn't creationism.

A: Very much so, yes. At first, they had been talking about creationism. They said the Earth is 6,000 years old. They believe man walked with dinosaurs. They also knew they could not push God into science class. They needed something a little sneakier. This is what intelligent design was.

Q: What's Dover like?

A: It's a conservative area. But there are also people who believe that teaching their children about God is their constitutional right, not the right of the school board. They hold these values quite dear.

Q: How hard was it for parents to go against the school board and their neighbors?

A: For some, it was quite difficult. A lot of them were afraid that they would be the people "banning God" from their community. A lot of the plaintiffs are very active in their churches. But they believe in science. The ACLU was looking for plaintiffs, and one by one, 11 parents did come forward.

Q: Big themes in your book are hypocrisy and self-righteousness. How did this case bring those issues out into the open?

A: One of the most painful elements of this case was watching how the school board members lied. They had talked about creationism, yet when it came time to give their depositions, they denied making these remarks. Their remarks had been recorded in the newspapers by two reporters, Joe Maldonado and Heidi Bernhard-Bubb. They said Joe and Heidi had made up the remarks. These are reporters of very deep faith, but the board said, nope, they're liars.

Q: Your father, Dean Lebo, ran a Christian radio station. You and your family are mainly agnostics. How did your coverage of this case affect your relationship?

A: My father has five kids, and he was always terrified that if we did not believe as he did, we would go to hell. I understood his fear. So for many years, I pretended that I believed. However, when I was dealing with the board members' lies, I would come to my father and say, look, they're slandering fellow Christians. And he would never denounce that. That really bothered me, and during the trial, I stopped trying to play along that I believed as he did.

Q: The judge was John Jones, a Bush appointee and Republican. Because of that, the defendants felt confident he would rule in their favor. What happened?

A: A lot of the pro-intelligent-design groups speculated wildly that he was in their pocket. As the

trial progressed, there was a lot of time spent watching the judge to see how he reacted. When there was some fascinating scientific testimony going on, he was leaning forward with the rest of us.

Q: How did he rule?

A: In the end, he said not only that the board members lied, he chided the "breathtaking inanity" of what the board had done in trying to push their religious views into science class. The big question was: Would he also rule that intelligent design was not science? And that is what he did.

Q: What's the impact of that?

A: It only affects Dover. However, outside Dover, a lot of districts have been paying attention. Ohio took their intelligent-design-friendly curriculum guidelines out. This cost Dover taxpayers \$1 million. So districts are paying heed. However, this battle is not over. We're seeing big challenges in Texas and Louisiana - and we expect other ones under the guise of academic freedom.

The Devil in Dover: An Insider's Story of Dogma v. Darwin in Small-Town America:

By Lauri Lebo (New Press; 2008; 238 pages; \$24.95)

To listen to a podcast with author Lauri Lebo, go to sfgate.com/ZFFX.

E-mail Nanette Asimov at nasimov@sfchronicle.com.

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