

Dr. Josette Mondanaro

Story Behind Angry Letter Is Complex One

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The story of Dr. Josette Mondanaro's notorious angry letter is as complex as the political motives that she contends are at the heart of Gov. Brown's decision to fire her.

The June 24 personal letter on state Health Department stationery, which purportedly prompted Brown to order her fired Oct. 25, was an emotional denunciation of an equally emotional subject: the use of children in pornography.

It was a strongly worded critique of a two-page letter-to-the-editor published in the professional psychological journal, Behavior Today, which was written by Larry L. Constantine, a Massachusetts family therapist and psychiatry instructor at Boston State Hospital.

Constantine's letter itself was a response to an earlier article about Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, the New York psychiatrist to whom Dr. Mondanaro wrote her letter. Constantine and Dr. Densen-Gerber, also a lawyer and a leading national proponent of stronger laws against so-called "kiddie porn," have long been at odds in professional debate over parental roles in general and the sexual development of children in particular.

Ironically, Constantine says he opposes Dr. Mondanaro's dismissal and would even testify in her behalf, even though she called his writing "male over-intellectualized bull—" and metaphorically suggested that certain sexual acts be performed on him because of his viewpoint.

"Constantine's point about children being sexually active is quite true, but quite misplaced," Dr. Mondanaro wrote. "We are not talking about children — peers mutually exploring themselves — in a non-threatening, non-coercive atmosphere. Why do these intellectual midgets attempt to cloud the issue by going to the gray zone when we are clearly talking about the extremes of sexuality? . . ."

Constantine was unaware of the letter or the furor it has caused in California until it was read to him during a telephone interview. He didn't appear particularly taken back by the communication.

"This is a society based on dialogue and debating issues," he said. "Although I don't agree with her, I'm very sorry to hear she was dismissed. I would be happy to testify in her behalf."

California Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, D-San Jose, who was described in the Mondanaro letter as having "his head (or something) screwed on wrong" because he had praised the article, takes a different view. Although Dr. Mondanaro personally apologized to Vasconcellos after the letter was removed from her files (by person or persons unknown) and publicized, the assemblyman remains unmollified.

"I don't like it when people take pot shots at me without knowing me," he

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said. He described child pornography as "a serious problem," but said "hysteria is not a way to deal with it." He characterized Dr. Mondanaro's letter as "gross, unbalanced and sick."

The major thesis of Constantine's letter to Behavior Today was that further research is needed before additional legislation restricting pornography is passed.

Constantine, who is on the board of consultants of Penthouse Magazine ("to keep them honest in terms of human sexuality"), says his Behavior

Today statement does not mean he favors sex between children and adults. He accused Dr. Densen-Gerber and her associates of misrepresenting his views.

"You can't suppress pornography any more than you can suppress drugs," he said. "If you try, one result is that (child pornography) will be submerged in organized crime . . . I really do care about kids as people, and in the haste to protect them I don't want to see them hurt more."

"The more there is a clampdown on kiddie porn, the worse it may become

— perhaps not just photographing children but photographing and murdering them."

Dr. Densen-Gerber, who directs the New York-based Odyssey Institute which is concerned with drug addiction and other social problems, was traveling and unavailable for comment. Frederick Cohen, the institute's executive vice-president, said Dr. Mondanaro's critique of Constantine's writing — a critique requested by Dr. Densen-Gerber after she received an inquiry about the Constantine article from California Assemblyman Mike Antonovich, R-Glendale — was "right up our alley."

"We were delighted by Josette's response," Cohen said. "We were delighted to find a bureaucrat who was willing to be outspoken and direct and to express her outrage . . ."

"I'm shocked to hear she was fired for expressing the opinions she did. I have little doubt the majority of Americans are supportive of her point of view."

As for Dr. Mondanaro, she said she reacted angrily to Constantine's article because of her experiences as a physician with sexually abused children.

"Writing that letter on state letterhead was the single most stupid thing I've ever done, but I still to this day don't think it's that bad a letter."

"I was angry, and I was angry for good reason."