



October 23, 2008

Evolution, alternatives argued

NKU forum stages a mock Scopes trial-in-reverse to stimulate debate

By Howard McEwen
Enquirer contributor

In 1859, Charles Darwin published "On the Origin of Species."

In 1925, a Tennessee high school teacher was put through the Scopes "monkey trial" for teaching Darwin's theory in schools. In 1960, Spencer Tracy starred in a film about the trial, "Inherit the Wind."

Wednesday night at Northern Kentucky University, the issues were still being debated - but this time with the sides reversed.

The argument Wednesday wasn't whether evolution could be taught in schools, but whether theories contrary to evolution - such as creationism or intelligent design - could or should be taught.

A mock trial was held, sponsored by the Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement and the Chase Center for Excellence in Advocacy.

"Tonight's mock trial is part of a broader initiative to foster a continuing public dialogue in Northern Kentucky, often around challenging public policy questions," said NKU president James Votruba. "This new initiative has a name - Northern Kentucky Forum."

The Northern Kentucky Forum mock trial had Susan Scott, a fictitious 21-year biology teacher in Chandler County, Ky., suing the Chandler County School Board to regain her job. The school board contended that Scott violated the law by teaching alternatives to evolution.

The audience served as jury.

During opening statements, Scott's attorney, Phil Taliaferro III, said, "She believes in evolution, but she has a problem. She has a very curious mind. She believes that her students ought to have access to both sides of evolutionary theory."

He compared Scott's termination to the trial of John Scopes in 1925.

"It was outrageous then and it is outrageous now," Taliaferro said.

Margo L. Grubbs, defense counsel for the Chandler School Board, said the case was a matter of law.

"She violated the rule of law and the U.S. Constitution. Scott can no longer teach creation or creation science because they violate our law," Grubbs said.

Scott countered that she wasn't teaching religion, but alternative theories that fill in the gaps left by Darwin.

The jury heard testimony from Scott and school board superintendent and real-life experts Dr. Ben Scripture, a biochemist and radio show host, and Edwin Kagin, the national legal director for American Atheist.

In the end, the jury decided that Scott could keep her job with conditions. Those conditions ranged from being allowed to teach as she had been, to being prohibited from teaching the alternative theories.

Many in the audience thought the event achieved the evening's goal as stated by Votruba of providing "a safe place for difficult conversations."
