

EQUAL PROTECTION OR FIRST AMENDMENT FREEDOMS:

WHICH WOULD NEW JERSEY RATHER LOSE?

Boy Scouts of America v. Dale
and
Bernstein v. OGCMA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The American legal system relies on the equitable resolution of conflicts and on finding a proper balance between competing rights. Circumstances often arise under this system in which two parties assert conflicting yet equal rights. When this happens, the courts must craft an interaction of the rights that best adheres to the applicable laws and precedent, while at the same time defending the natural and procedural rights of both parties to the fullest extent possible. One such circumstance is pending within the dispute of *Bernstein v. Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association*. This case exemplifies the need for a newly defined balance between a First Amendment right to the freedom of expressive association and the Fourteenth Amendment right to freedom from discrimination within places of public accommodation.¹

The purpose of this article is to compare rulings from state and federal courts on the balance of protecting expressive action versus the duty to ensure equal protection and protect against discrimination. The State of New Jersey has consistently been thrust to the forefront of this delicate balance due to the actions of its legislature and the subsequent cases that have been brought before its courts. For the purposes of this article, New Jersey will be used as a microcosm to examine potentially similar conflicts across the country on the state level and for assisting in drawing conclusions that may be applicable on a national level.

1 See David M. Estes, *The Ocean Grove Boardwalk Pavilion: A Public Accommodation?*, 11 RUTGERS JOURNAL OF LAW AND RELIGION 252, 252-53 (2009).

II. *BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA V. DALE*

The dichotomy of private expressive association and public accommodation laws was brought to a head in New Jersey by the case *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, 530 U.S. 640 (2000). James Dale joined the Boy Scouts of America (“BSA”) in 1978 at the age of eight. He served as a distinguished member, and in 1988 achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest honor BSA bestows upon its members.² In 1989, Dale applied for adult membership in the organization as he prepared to attend college at Rutgers University. After his acceptance, he began serving as an assistant scoutmaster for his local Monmouth County troop.³

The controversy arose due to some of Dale’s actions while attending Rutgers. Soon after publicly revealing that he was gay, Dale became involved with the University’s Lesbian/Gay Alliance and in 1990 was elected co-president. In July of 1990, Dale was featured in an interview for a newspaper that was covering an event sponsored by the Lesbian/Gay Alliance.⁴ Within the month, Dale received a letter from James Kay, BSA’s Monmouth Council Executive, revoking his adult membership in BSA and terminating his leadership position as assistant scoutmaster. When Dale requested the reason for this decision, Kay responded by stating that BSA “specifically forbid membership to homosexuals.”⁵

In 1992, Dale filed a six-count complaint against BSA in

2 *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, 530 U.S. 640, 644 (2000).

3 *Id.* at 644.

4 *Id.* at 645.

5 *Id.*

the New Jersey Superior Court, Chancery Division, and the court ruled in favor of BSA on the grounds of protecting the freedom of expressive association. The Appellate Division of the Superior Court, however, reversed and remanded the majority of the case for further legal proceedings.⁶ Eventually, the New Jersey Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Superior Court and BSA was determined to be subject to public accommodation laws. As such, they were held to be in violation of those laws for revoking Dale's membership on the basis of his homosexuality.⁷ In addition to various other arguments, BSA claimed an exception to those laws on the basis of its right to expressive association. This right offers protection to private organizations for their own expressive actions, but in *Roberts v. United States Jaycees*, 468 US 609 (1984) the Supreme Court noted that "[t]he right to associate for expressive purposes is not, however, absolute. Infringements on that right may be justified by regulations adopted to serve compelling state interests, unrelated to the suppression of ideas, that cannot be achieved through means significantly less restrictive of associational freedoms."⁸

In *Dale*, the New Jersey Supreme Court rejected BSA's First Amendment argument on the grounds that the court was "not persuaded . . . that a shared goal of Boy Scout members is to associ-

6 Dale v. Boy Scouts of America, 308 NJ Super. 516, 529 (1998), *rev'd*, 530 U.S. 640 (2000).

7 Dale v. BSA, 160 N.J. 734 A. 2d 1199, 1230 (N.J. Sup. Ct. 1999), *rev'd*, 530 U.S. 640 (2000).

8 Roberts v. United States Jaycees, 468 US 609, 623 (1984).

ate in order to preserve the view that homosexuality is immoral.”⁹ Consequently, the court stated that admitting Dale into membership would not hamper the other members’ ability to carry out the overarching mission of the organization “in any significant way.”¹⁰ Finally, the court concluded that New Jersey did indeed possess a compelling interest in eliminating discrimination to justify this intrusion on BSA’s expressive action.¹¹

The United States Supreme Court disagreed. Chief Justice Rehnquist, writing for the majority, began his opinion by quoting from *Roberts*:

[W]e observed that implicit in the right to engage in activities protected by the First Amendment is a corresponding right to associate with others in pursuit of a wide variety of political, social, economic, educational, religious, and cultural ends. This right is crucial in preventing the majority from imposing its views on groups that would rather express other, perhaps unpopular, ideas.¹²

Citing *Roberts*, the Court established a two-part test for determining a proper abridgement of the right to associate for expressive purposes. First, the Court must determine if the group, in this case BSA, engages in “expressive action.”¹³ If not, then

9 *Dale*, 160 N.J at 1223-24.

10 *Id.* at 1206-1207.

11 *Id.* at 1227.

12 *Boy Scouts of America*, *supra* note 2, at 648 (internal quotation marks omitted).

13 *Id.* at 648.

the argument is moot and the public accommodation law should be applied. If the group does participate in such action however, then it must be determined whether or not the forced action (i.e. the re-admittance of Dale into membership) significantly affects the group's ability to advocate public or private viewpoints.¹⁴

To determine that BSA was in fact engaged in expressive action, Rehnquist cited several of their mission and purpose statements including the Scout Oath. BSA contends that the phrase "morally straight," found within their oath, is the foundational basis for their exclusion of James Dale and any other openly homosexual individual from leadership. Given that several such statements exist, the Court concluded that BSA actively engages in acceptable expressive action.¹⁵ The Court also rejected the argument that BSA's expressive action was nullified by the fact that it was self-contradictory. The apparent soundness, or lack thereof, in a group's position is irrelevant to the courts; the fact that it does espouse the position at all is enough to count as expressive activity.¹⁶

Having made that determination, the Court then addressed the second prong of the test: does the re-admittance of Dale into membership significantly affect or burden BSA's desire to not promote homosexual conduct as a legitimate form of behavior? On this issue, the New Jersey Supreme Court found that "Boy Scout

14 *Id.* at 650.

15 *Id.* at 651.

16 1 SCOTT A. MERRIMAN, RELIGION AND THE LAW IN AMERICA: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PERSONAL BELIEF AND PUBLIC POLICY 160 (2007).

members do not associate for the purpose of disseminating the belief that homosexuality is immoral; Boy Scouts discourages its leaders from disseminating *any* views on sexual issues; and Boy Scouts includes sponsors and members who subscribe to different views in respect of homosexuality.”¹⁷

On this crucial point, the Court could not disagree more. It refutes the lower court’s arguments in three respects: First, it states that an associative group need not associate for the express purpose of disseminating a particular message in order to qualify for First Amendment protections. Second, the method of expression is left to the discretion of the organization and should not be second-guessed by the courts. Finally, for a group’s actions to be considered “expressive action” it is not necessary for every member of the group to agree on the policy in question.¹⁸ In other words, the toleration of dissention is not equivalent to the surrender of a publicly or privately held position. Utilizing the three arguments above, the Court concluded that BSA’s desire not to promote homosexuality would be significantly burdened by the admission of Mr. Dale as an openly homosexual assistant scoutmaster.

Finding that BSA falls under the protection of the First Amendment, and that the inclusion of Mr. Dale would significantly burden the organization’s ability to espouse that protected expression, the Court ruled that New Jersey did not have an

17 *Dale*, 160 N.J at 1223.

18 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 654-55.

appropriately compelling interest with which to override BSA's First Amendment rights.¹⁹ In this instance, the First Amendment freedom of expressive association ultimately preempted the application of New Jersey's public accommodation law, as well as any potential state interest in dispelling discrimination against homosexuals on the basis of their sexual orientation.

III. RECENT NEW JERSEY LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL ACTION

"The statutory and decisional laws of this State protect individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation."²⁰ This quotation by Justice Albin of the New Jersey Supreme Court, from *Lewis v. Harris*, 908 A.2d 196 (N.J. 2006), highlights the fact that New Jersey views itself at the national forefront of the advancement of civil rights, especially in regards to sexual orientation. The laws referenced by Justice Albin have been in effect since 1991, when New Jersey's state legislature added the phrase "affectional or sexual orientation" to the Law Against Discrimination ("LAD").²¹ The addition of that phrase to the LAD was the legal basis on which Mr. Dale brought his suit against BSA, which became the first major judicial test of the new legislation and how it would interact with the First Amendment protection of expressive association.

The flexible and ever-changing LAD has been both aggressive and reactive in legislating civil rights in New Jersey. Pursuant

19 *Id.* at 659.

20 *Lewis v. Harris*, 908 A.2d 196, 200 (N.J. Sup. Ct. 2006).

21 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 663-64.

to that law, New Jersey created a Division on Civil Rights (“Division”), a branch of the state Attorney General’s office, and imbued it with the “power to prevent and eliminate discrimination in the manner prohibited by this act [LAD] against persons because of race, creed...sexual orientation, etc.”²² The Division thus has both the enforcement and judicial power to ensure compliance with the LAD as well as any of its subsequent legislation. According to the Division’s own website, its mandate is to “enforce [] the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination.”²³

A recent ruling from the New Jersey Supreme Court in *Lewis v. Harris* made another alteration to LAD. In *Lewis*, the court was asked whether or not same-sex couples possess a fundamental right to marry, or regardless of that, whether they should receive equal benefits as heterosexual couples, based upon Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the New Jersey Constitution. The court’s ruling strongly dictated to the legislature that it “must either amend the marriage statutes to include same-sex couples or create a parallel statutory structure,” to comply with the sentiment of equality extended to same-sex couples within Article 1, Paragraph 1.²⁴

Several legislative reactions flowed from *Lewis*. The first was the New Jersey Domestic Partnership Act. This act established the state’s recognition of the importance of domestic partnerships of all kinds, regardless of sexual orientation, and stated

22 N.J. STAT. § 10:5-6 (2010).

23 New Jersey Division on Civil Rights, Frequently Asked Questions, available at <http://www.nj.gov/oag/dcr/faq.html#faq1>.

24 *Lewis*, 908 A.2d at 201.

that all relationships should be granted the same benefits as traditional marriage relationships.²⁵ In 2006, the LAD was amended yet again, this time to include “gender identity and expression.”²⁶ The process continued in December of 2006 with the passage of the New Jersey Civil Unions Act, which officially established civil unions as state approved institutions and stated that “[c]ivil union couples shall have all the same benefits, protections and responsibilities under law... as are granted to spouses in a marriage.”²⁷

Despite these amendments to New Jersey’s civil rights laws, until recently, there has been little ongoing conflict between these laws and the First Amendment since the *Boy Scouts* case. Though *Boy Scouts* remains good law, the updated statutory law will provide a different context the next time that a public accommodation application of LAD is challenged on the basis of First Amendment protection. One potential challenge, reflecting much of the recent legislation, is currently pending within Division.

IV. *BERNSTEIN V. OGCMA*

On June 19, 2007, several months after the Civil Unions Act went into effect, Harriet Bernstein and Luisa Paster (“Complainants”) filed a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. The women were a lesbian couple who resided together within the borders of Ocean Grove, a community within

25 Thomas Hoff Prol, *New Jersey’s Civil Union Law: A Constitutional “Equal” Creates Inequality*, 52 NY LAW SCHOOL L. REV. 169, 175 (2008).

26 *Id.* at 174.

27 N.J. STAT. ANN. § 37:1-31(a).

Neptune Township. The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association (“OGCMA”) is a non-profit ministry organization, governed by a Board of Trustees, which owns and operates all of the land, beach, and sea within the traditional borders of Ocean Grove.²⁸ The Complainants alleged that OGCMA had discriminated against them in an area of public accommodation by denying the couple’s request to hold their civil union ceremony on OGCMA property.²⁹

In December of 2008, the Division issued a finding of probable cause in *Bernstein*. The Division’s standard for issuing such a finding under LAD is “a reasonable ground for suspicion supported by facts and circumstances strong enough to warrant a cautious person to believe that the law was violated and the matter should proceed to a hearing.”³⁰ Having determined that there was probable cause to support the complaint, the Division forwarded the case for a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge, and that proceeding is still pending. If the Judge determines that unlawful discrimination has occurred, then the Director of the Division can grant relief by ordering the OGCMA to take affirmative remedial action. At that point, either party could appeal the Judge’s determination to the Superior Court of New Jersey.³¹

28 David M. Estes, *The Ocean Grove Boardwalk Pavilion: A Public Accommodation?*, 11 RUTGERS JOURNAL OF LAW AND RELIGION 252, 256 (2009).

29 *Bernstein v. Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association*, DCR Docket No. PN34XB-03008 (Division on Civil Rights, Dec. 29, 2008), available at <http://www.nj.gov/oag/newsreleases08/pr20081229a-Bernstein-v-OGCMA.pdf>.

30 Estes, *supra* note 28, at 258. (citing *Frank v. Ivy Club*, 548 A.2d 1142, 1150 (App. Div. 1988), *rev’d on other grounds*, 120 N.J. 73 (1990), *cert. denied*, 498 U.S. 1073 (1991)).

31 Estes, *supra* note 28, at 258-59.

Within the original complaint, the Complainants argue that the property in question, entitled the “Boardwalk Pavilion” (“Pavilion”) qualifies under state law as a place of public accommodation for multiple reasons. First, it is located on Ocean Grove’s boardwalk, which is a type of location specifically cited within New Jersey’s public accommodation statute.³² Second, the OGCMA had routinely rented the building out for weddings in the past and left it open for general public access a majority of the time.³³ Finally, the Complainants pointed to the OGCMA’s 1989 application for a Green Acres real property tax exemption, in which it certified that the Pavilion would be “open to the public on an equal basis.”³⁴

OGCMA has counter-arguments to each of those claims, and as such the classification of the Pavilion as a place of public accommodation remains a heavily disputed aspect of the case.³⁵ If the Pavilion were ruled not to be a place of public accommodation, then the complaint would be dismissed and any remaining arguments would be moot.³⁶ The purpose of this article however, is not to determine whether or not the Pavilion should be considered a place of public accommodation. Instead, I wish to consider the intersection of public accommodation applications of civil rights’ law and the freedom of expressive association. For purposes of

32 N.J. STAT. § 10:5-5 (2010).

33 *Bernstein*, at 3-4.

34 *Estes*, *supra* note 28, at 261.

35 *See id.* at 259.

36 *See id.*

this discussion, I will assume that the Pavilion is a place of public accommodation.

What remains is the dichotomy between the Complainants' rights not to be discriminated against and OGCMA's First Amendment right of expressive association. Though the facts are different, the basic legal issues at stake are sufficiently similar to those of *Boy Scouts* for it to be reasonably argued that if this issue in *Bernstein* were brought before the Supreme Court, that the same level and method of scrutiny would be applied.

Under the Supreme Court's two part test, the first question is whether OGCMA engages in "expressive action."³⁷ If so, then it must be determined whether or not the forced action (allowing Bernstein and Paster to hold their civil union ceremony in the Pavilion) significantly affects the group's ability to advocate public or private viewpoints.³⁸

As the Court did in *Boy Scouts*, it is important to examine the foundational documents and statements of OGCMA in order to determine whether or not the group engages in "expressive action."³⁹ Both sides accept that OGCMA is a private, non-profit organization.⁴⁰ According to its website, "the mission of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, rooted in its Methodist Heritage, is to provide opportunities for spiritual birth, growth and renewal through worship, education, cultural and recreational

37 *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, 530 U.S. 640, 648 (2000).

38 *Id.* at 650.

39 *Id.* at 648-49.

40 *Bernstein*, at 2.

activities in a Christian seaside setting.”⁴¹

From their mission statement, the general purpose of OGCMA seems to be clear. Through the use of its facilities and programs OGCMA seeks to advocate a traditional Christian message as reflected by the United Methodist Church. As the Court said in *Boy Scouts*, “[i]t seems indisputable that an association that seeks to transmit such a system of values engages in expressive activity.”⁴² If any doubt remains however, Justice O’Connor’s opinion in *Roberts* confirms that the Court’s definition of expressive action includes “a broad range of activities” and should not be limited to “expressive words or conduct that are strident, contentious, or divisive,” but can also “take the form of quiet persuasion, *inculcation of traditional values*, instruction of the young, and community service.”⁴³

Utilizing the reasoning above, OGCMA clearly engages in expressive activity. Given this, the question becomes whether forcing OGCMA to allow Bernstein and Paster to hold their civil union ceremony at the Pavilion would significantly affect OGCMA’s ability to advocate public or private viewpoints.⁴⁴ An examination into the OGCMA’s views on homosexuality is required in order to make this determination.

From its beginning, the OGCMA has retained close ties to

41 Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association Home Page, *available at* <http://www.ogcma.org/> (last visited Oct. 3, 2010).

42 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 649-50.

43 *Roberts v. United States Jaycees*, 468 US 609, 637 (1984) (emphasis added).

44 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 650.

the United Methodist Church (“UMC”). The denomination is still mentioned within the OGCMA mission statement, and all voting members of the organization’s Board of Trustees must be active Methodist church members.⁴⁵ This allows for the reasonability of OGCMA’s claims that the basis for rejecting the Complainant’s request is that it “does not permit its facilities to be used for purposes that conflict with the clearly established policies of the United Methodist Church.”⁴⁶ Rehnquist’s arguments from *Boy Scouts* regarding proper deference are important to note here; especially the point that OGCMA’s claim to adhere to established Methodist policies should be regarded as accurate, for “it is not the role of the courts to reject a group’s expressed values because they disagree with those values or find them internally inconsistent.”⁴⁷

Given that OGCMA espouses Methodist principles, and does so in order to identify its own positions, an examination of the stance taken on homosexuality by the UMC is essential. According to the United Methodist Book of Discipline, the UMC views marriage as a “...shared fidelity between a man and a woman” and stipulates that “[c]eremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” More broadly stated, “[t]he United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian

45 *Bernstein*, at 2.

46 *Id.* at 5.

47 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 651.

teaching.”⁴⁸ According to the Supreme Court, this written expression is instructive with respect to the UMC’s, and subsequently OGCMA’s viewpoint on the issue of homosexuality. Having shown that OGCMA has a particular viewpoint on the issues of homosexuality and civil unions, it must now be determined whether or not being forced to allow Bernstein and Paster’s civil union ceremony at the Pavilion would significantly burden OGCMA’s ability to advocate these views. On this point in the reasoning from *Boy Scouts*, the Court looks to an example from an earlier case, *Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston, Inc.*, 515 U.S. 557 (1995).⁴⁹

Hurley centered on the organizer of a privately operated St. Patrick’s Day parade who denied a request made to march in the parade by an Irish-American, Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual (“GLIB”) group. The group argued that the parade was a place of public accommodation and so they could not be denied access merely on the basis of their sexual orientation.⁵⁰ In reaching its conclusion however, the Court made a very interesting and determinative distinction. That distinction was “that the parade organizers did not wish to exclude the GLIB members because of their sexual orientations, but because they wanted to march behind a GLIB banner.”⁵¹

48 *From The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2008).

49 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 653.

50 *Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston, Inc.*, 515 U.S. 557, 559-62 (1995).

51 *Boy Scouts of America*, 530 U.S. at 653-54.

Applied to *Bernstein*, this distinction has great significance. In fact, the same argument can be made that OGCMA is not denying Bernstein and Paster their civil union ceremony because of the couple's sexual orientation, but instead because of the message that is conveyed by the ceremony itself. "As the presence of GLIB in Boston's St. Patrick's Day parade would have interfered with the parade organizers' choice not to propound a particular point of view," so the presence of a civil union ceremony in a prominent OGCMA facility would interfere with the organization's choice not to support a point of view contrary to its own beliefs.⁵² In many ways, the proposed civil union ceremony in *Bernstein* is analogous to the parade banner that would have been carried by GLIB members in *Hurley*.

The Supreme Court's rebuke of the New Jersey Supreme Court in *Boy Scouts* also helps to strengthen OGCMA's case. Firstly, it is not necessary that OGCMA exists for the sole purpose of denouncing civil unions in order to be entitled to First Amendment protection when speaking on the issue.⁵³ Secondly, the method of expression that the OGCMA chooses for disseminating its views on homosexuality is not a matter of importance to the courts.⁵⁴ Finally, not every person involved with OGCMA must agree in order for the group's policies to be considered "expressive association."⁵⁵ This is crucial in this scenario, for it nullifies

52 See *id.* at 654.

53 See *id.* at 655.

54 See *id.*

55 See *id.* at 655-56.

the effect of members of the Board of Trustees and other community members who have publically disagreed with the Board's decision to continue its policy regarding civil unions. In short, "[t]he fact that the organization does not trumpet its views from the housetops, or that it tolerates dissent within its ranks, does not mean that its views receive no First Amendment protection."⁵⁶

Based upon the facts and precedent of cases such as *Boy Scouts* and *Hurley*, the final outcome of the administrative proceeding, or any subsequent litigation, regarding *Bernstein v. Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association* should be resolved in favor of OGCMA. This conclusion does not turn on the issue of whether or not the Pavilion is a place of public accommodation, due to the over-arching need to protect OGCMA's freedom of expressive association with respect to the use of its own property, regardless of the extent of the public's freedom to utilize the building.

V. CONCLUSION

New Jersey remains at the front of the battle over this conflict between public accommodation laws and the protection of expressive action relative to other states across the country and is likely to remain so for many years. Private organizations with publicly accessible property and civil rights advocacy groups alike should take notice of cases such as *Bernstein*. With a large amount of recent legislation still waiting for a legitimate test, much remains to be determined as to whether the courts will follow the conser-

56 *Id.* at 656.

vative trend set by *Boy Scouts* or continue the push to extend civil rights further, and into even more demographic classifications.

Despite past trends, a recent ruling indicates the possibility of a departure from the reasoning used in *Boy Scouts* and *Hurley*. Writing for the majority in *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, 561 U.S. ____ (2010), Justice Ginsberg references the landmark sodomy case *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), and argues that policies against homosexual conduct are analogous to discrimination against homosexual persons.⁵⁷ If applied to *Bernstein*, this reasoning would spell certain defeat for OGCMA. And yet, several key differences between these two cases, most notably that OGCMA is not a public entity, ensure that doubt remains as to whether this application would be made if the issue were brought before the Court. Interpreted properly, and in accordance with the precedent of *Boy Scouts*, the fundamental Constitutional protection of freedom of association will remain in place and serve as the appropriate counter-balance to equal protection.⁵⁸

57 *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, 561 U.S. ____ (2010).

58 **Author's Note:** As a resident of Ocean Grove and the son of OGCMA Chief Administrative Officers Scott and Nancy Hoffman, the *Bernstein* case first came to my attention in a very personal way. It resurfaced again when a fellow student in Dr. Sparks' Constitutional History class brought it up as a current example of a case we were discussing at the time, not surprisingly, *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*. I would like to thank my professors for instilling in me the importance of being able to analyze any situation based on its merits alone and also my parents for their amazing support and for faithfully keeping me up to date on *Bernstein*. It was an honor and a privilege to put my scholarly ambitions to work on a subject that hits so close to home.

