

MONDAY, FEB. 26, 2007 | LONG ISLAND EDITION

Ban on word an exercise in sensitivity

BY KARLA SCHUSTER
karla.schuster@newsday.com

It only comes up once or twice a year, but it's a drill that Malverne High School football coach Fred Brewington says is among the most powerful: if you use the "n" word, you get 25 push-ups and an explanation of why the racial slur isn't a greeting or a nickname.

"We don't just punish 'em. We explain to them why it isn't just a word," said Brewington, a civil rights

attorney in Hempstead who has coached at Malverne for 25 years. "In large part, individuals who use it for slang fail to realize the historical underpinnings."

That same idea is driving a movement among elected officials nationwide — including New York City and some of its suburbs — to propose banning the use of the "n" word as a symbolic gesture.

Today, a proposal for a such a ban is to be debated by a committee of the City Council. If approved by the committee today, the full council will consider it on Wednesday.

The bans are aimed at young people who have grown up hearing the word in rap lyrics and movies.

"There are people using this word without understanding the full context," said Queens City Councilman Leroy Comrie, a lead sponsor of the resolution.

During a 20-minute speech in front of the Nazarene Congregational Church in Brooklyn yesterday, Comrie urged church members to talk to young people about avoiding the "n" word, said his spokesman, Rance Huff. Comrie also spoke about

pressuring entertainment companies not to publish works that include the word.

Comrie's resolution — like ones passed by legislatures in Westchester County and Nyack, and the New Jersey cities of Paterson and Irvington

— does not violate the First Amendment because it doesn't carry any penalties or carry the force of law, say sponsors.

State legislators and U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-Harlem) have indicated that they hope to propose

similar measures. Neither legislatures in Nassau, whose charter bars enacting symbolic resolutions, or Suffolk are considering such bans. In Texas, the governor of a small town outside Houston proposed an ordinance banning the slur, with a \$500 fine for violators, but backed down amid concerns it would violate free speech.

"The government can't ban the use of any word," said Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union. "This is a statement of policy and principle."

Brooklyn freelance filmmakers Kovan Flowers, 37, and his wife, Jill, 39, took on the issue when they launched www.abolishtheword.com about 10 months ago. Their interest was sparked while listening to a radio show about the use of the "n" word and whether blacks can redefine it. "The point is that this is not a word that can be co-opted," Jill Flowers said. "That's like taking a pile of manure and trying to find the nutrients. This is not a word that can be reclaimed."

Staff writer Jennifer Barrios contributed to this story.



Attorney and coach Fred Brewington



Councilman Leroy Comrie proposed to ban the "n" word.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / ALAN RAJA