

Atheist gained fame, lost son in prayer fight

By Larry Witham
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BALTIMORE — Madalyn Murray O'Hair, America's best-known atheist, rose from obscurity to fame when she walked the halls of what is now Chinquapin Middle School to reenroll her son William.

During that 1960 visit, she noticed students reading Bible verses and reciting the Lord's Prayer.

The Supreme Court coupled her legal protest with a 1958 complaint by the Schempp family of Pennsylvania. On June 17, 1963, the high court ruled that prayer and devotional Bible reading in public schools are unconstitutional.

Some at Chinquapin today are unaware of the colorful history of the brick building in northeast Baltimore when it was Woodbourne Junior High.

"Oh, really? Is this the school?" a teaching aide asked.

The name of the Schempp family, Unitarians whose son read the Koran in morning class rather than stand for the Lord's Prayer, is enshrined in the ruling: Abington School District vs. Schempp.

But it's the Baltimore case that Americans remember: "This image persists today — that atheists opposed prayer in school," said Robert Peck, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union.

Persisting also are the different stories told by mother and son, now estranged for 20 years.

William J. Murray wrote in his autobiography that his mother, a member of the Communist Party, returned to Baltimore from Paris in 1960 after failing to defect to the Soviet Union with her two sons.

"That's such a . . . lie," Mrs. O'Hair said in a telephone interview from American Atheists Inc.'s general headquarters in Austin, Texas. "It's made of whole cloth."

The public record is clear on the prayer and Bible-reading dispute, at least. She demanded that William be excused. The principal denied the request and said withdrawal from school was truant.

Mrs. O'Hair's letter to the Baltimore Sun was not published, but a



Photo by Bert V. Goulat. The Washington Times
William J. Murray, now a Christian evangelist and author, is returning to Baltimore on Thursday to preach.

reporter and photographer knocked on her door. The Oct. 27 headline read, "Boy, 14, Balks at Bible Reading."

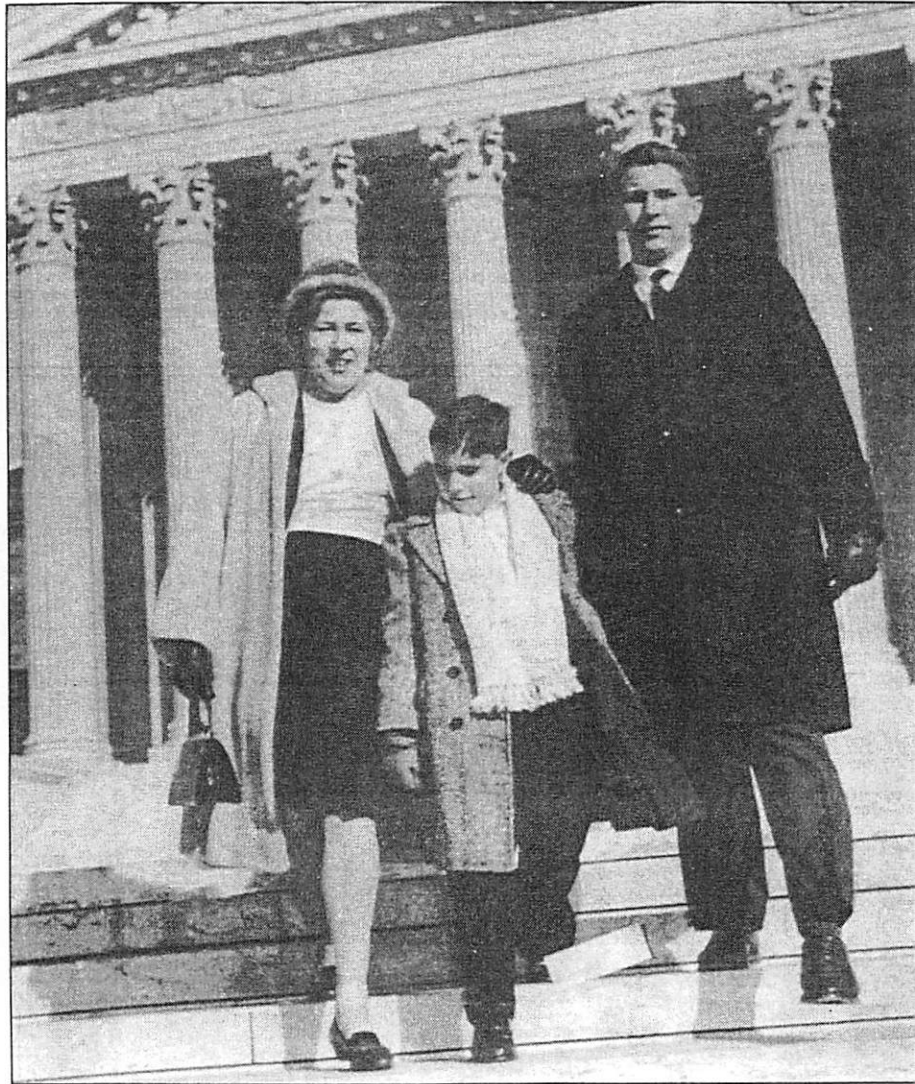
Affiliates of the three television networks swarmed to the O'Hairs' small brick row house, and the rest was history.

"It was a very emotional situation," Vernon Vavrina, deputy superintendent for Baltimore's secondary schools at the time, recalled in an interview. He visited Woodbourne to ask William his feelings on the issue.

"It was unfortunate that this young boy was being used by the parent," he said. "It should have been handled by adults. Pupils shouldn't be used to effect social change."

Mr. Murray, now a Christian evangelist and author, returns to Baltimore for the first time since his boyhood June 17 to preach in the Baltimore Arena about America's spiritual problems.

"Besides it being a Marxist home, it was a dysfunctional home," Mr. Murray said in an interview about his Baltimore upbringing. "I was totally indoctrinated. It had nothing to do with atheism. She wanted to see the breakdown of American cap-



Madalyn Murray O'Hair stands outside the Supreme Court with her sons, William (center) and Garth Murray, in 1963.

italist society."

In the months after the 1960 dispute at Woodbourne, the Maryland attorney general said the religious activity was constitutional, and the Maryland Supreme Court dismissed the complaint.

In April 1962 a federal appeals court ruled in favor of the school, saying nothing in the Constitution "intended to stifle all rapport between religion and government."

The American Civil Liberties Union had backed off the Murray

case to focus on the Schempp appeal, which reached the Supreme Court in 1963.

Meanwhile, Mr. Murray said, his mother became manager of the Communist Party's New Era Book Shop in Baltimore and began publishing the American Atheist.

Mrs. O'Hair sees her contribution in American history not only as showing that legal action can protect nonreligious minorities, but as separating communism from atheism in the public mind.

"We have founded something called American atheism," she said.

During the 1960s uproar, Mr. Murray said, atheists and noncommunists across the country sent him mother money and deeds to real estate.

"In one year, she made more money than she had in a lifetime," he said. "It also ended her aversion to capitalism."

What is the relationship between mother and son now? "There isn't any," Mrs. O'Hair said.