

METRO

By CYNTHIA WILSON
Staff Writer

A male student who wore a dress to Central High School yesterday was suspended for wearing disruptive attire — and was later arrested and jailed for trespassing after he refused to leave school.

Senior John Paul Poynter said he was trying to express "another side of my personality" when he wore the ankle-length, embroidered black dress with a side split, black pantyhose and black, low-heel sling-back shoes. He said the issue for him was freedom of expression and his right to express his homosexuality.

"I wore the dress because I wanted to be myself," said Poynter, 18. "It was just a way to say this is another side of me."

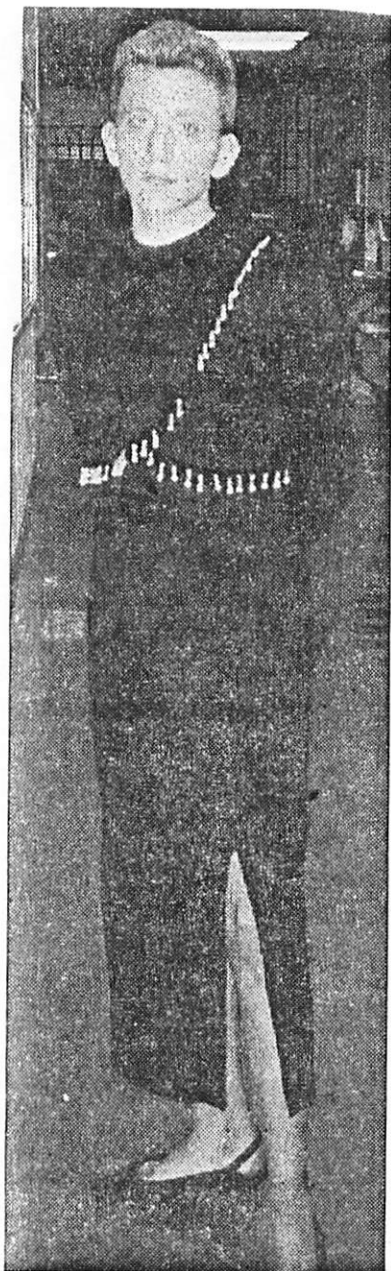
But the outfit, including a wig, drew more attention to Poynter than school officials thought students could handle.

Poynter was charged with third-degree criminal trespassing and disorderly conduct. He was being held in the Jefferson County Jail — in isolation for his protection — in lieu of \$150 bond. He is scheduled to be arraigned this morning.

Poynter lives with his mother and stepfather. His mother, who uses her current husband's name, asked not to be identified because she didn't want the publicity to affect other family members. She said she knew her son intended to wear a

See DRESS

Page 3, col. 5, this section



STAFF PHOTO BY CYNTHIA WILSON

"I wore the dress because I wanted to be myself," Central student John Paul Poynter said.

Student suspended for attire, later jailed

DRESS

Continued from Page B 1

dress to school, but she said she thought it was a school-sanctioned activity.

"I don't think what he did was right," she said. "But he's going to stand up for what he believes in no matter what anyone thinks."

Another boy, who had been a student at Central until about two weeks ago, also wore a dress, according to Lauren Brown Roberts, spokeswoman for Jefferson County Public Schools. Roberts said that boy agreed to leave the school when asked.

In an interview from jail, Poynter said he didn't leave because he had a right to be there. He said his attire shouldn't have mattered if it didn't violate the school dress code.

However, Roberts said Poynter's dress violated district policy that a student's appearance should not be disruptive.

Poynter said it was principal Harold Fenderson who was disrupting school by making an issue of his attire. He said reaction from some of the students was good, although two students had pulled off his wig and some had taunted him.

Fenderson said he suspended Poynter for three days because he refused to change clothes or leave. He said Poynter refused to leave with his stepfather and ran off and hid in the school until lunchtime.

Fenderson said Poynter's stepfather suggested he call police and he did, because after having been suspended and asked to leave, Poynter was considered a trespasser.

Poynter was arrested at about 11:30 a.m. in the school cafeteria.

Poynter said he doesn't normally wear women's clothing to school, although he had come to school dressed as a woman for "Opposite Sex" day — an activity during homecoming festivities in which students can dress as the opposite

sex.

"If I was violating the dress code, why was it OK to for Opposite Day?" he asked.

Loretta Stewart, assistant principal at Central, said, "When everyone is doing it (during homecoming), it's not disruptive. No one person is being singled out."

Stewart, who said she saw students harassing Poynter, said she was concerned for his safety.

Some students signed a petition opposing Poynter's suspension and upholding his right to be open about his homosexuality. But a few students taunted the young man with obscenities, students said.

"They were so degrading to him," said Vanessa Vittitoe, a junior.

Some defended his right to wear women's clothes.

Tawanta Cox, a junior, wore oversized jeans and a man's shirt and jacket. "I'm dressed like a man," she said, "and I wasn't suspended."

Some students said they disagreed with Poynter's views on homosexuality but admired his willingness to stand up for himself.

Others disagreed.

Junior Kris Thomas said he might have wanted to fight Poynter "if I had seen him in the bathroom dressed like that."

But Angel Burrell, a junior, said that kind of reaction from students should result in their suspension, not Poynter's.

"If they keep suspending him, how is he going to be accepted for being gay?" she asked.

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