

Build the future of manufacturing:  
*Make Ohio home.*

jobsOhio.com



## The artist behind gun T-shirt says both sides in Wisconsin school controversy are missing the point

**Bruce Vielmetti, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel** Published 5:00 a.m. CT April 16, 2018 | Updated 9:05 a.m. CT April 16, 2018

A T-shirt at the center of a civil rights lawsuit against a Wisconsin high school principal spells LOVE using a handgun, a grenade, knives and an assault-style rifle to form the letters.

Is that threatening? Clever? Political? Humorous? It all depends on your perspective.



Thomas Deininger, who designed this LOVE shirt about 11 years ago, said they were never meant to promote guns, the Second Amendment or violence. He now sells them only in pastel colors, and has tried to get other sellers from infringing on his copyright. (Photo: Thomas Deininger)

Markesan High School Principal John Koopman deemed it "inappropriate" and warned freshman Matthew Schoenecker and his parents that if the boy continued to wear it to school, he would be asked to change, cover it up or spend the day in an isolated cubicle near the office.

After Schoenecker sued Koopman last week in federal court, it made national news.

**RELATED:** [Wisconsin high schooler sues principal who banned T-shirts depicting guns \(/story/news/local/wisconsin/2018/04/11/wisconsin-high-schooler-sues-principal-who-banned-t-shirts-depicting-guns/503447002/\)](http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/wisconsin/2018/04/11/wisconsin-high-schooler-sues-principal-who-banned-t-shirts-depicting-guns/503447002/)

That's how Tom Deininger, who designed the logo about 11 years ago, came to see the story and scratched his head.

"The whole thing is perfect for our time, in a sense," he said in a phone interview. "It's how people are not understanding each other, and arguing about how to argue."

He called the Journal Sentinel to point out that the design is most definitely not a pro-gun message.

"Guns are stupid. They're for cowards. Express yourself other ways than shooting stuff," he said. "They're not all bad, but society's not better for them."

He said his intention with the design was to turn something that plagues society into a positive.

"That's the artist's role, to take what hurts us and turn it into something beautiful," he said.

**LIKE US ON FACEBOOK: Get the latest Journal Sentinel news in your feed**  
(<http://bit.ly/2xfZ9Bv>)

So, he said, he thought of another way to look at guns and weapons, and turn them on their head by spelling LOVE.

No matter that both Schoenecker and Koopman may be misinterpreting his message, Deininger sides with the student.

"I have strong feelings on gun control — but I support freedom. People should be able to wear whatever they want."

Deininger, 48, is a [Rhode Island artist \(http://www.tomdeiningerart.com/works.html\)](http://www.tomdeiningerart.com/works.html) who made his name in realism done in found-objects, but who dabbled in T-shirt designs about 12 years ago. He said he and a writer friend put out a couple dozen designs for a few years, and the LOVE shirt was among their most popular.



Thomas Deininger, the Rhode Island artist who designed a T-shirt that says LOVE in weapons. (Photo: Thomas Deininger)



Matthew Schoenecker is shown wearing one of his T-shirts with the letters in LOVE formed by a handgun, grenade, two knives and an assault rifle at Markesan High School. (Photo: Submitted)

So much so that many knock-offs (like the one Schoenecker has) proliferated and he had to enforce a copyright. He's begun selling his design again, but on pastel-colored shirts and with an extra message on the website — toughloveaid.org — he hopes makes clear his intentions: Fight violence with love.

The site says it's also donating 20% of all sales proceeds to "efforts against gun violence."



Thomas Deininger, a Rhode Island artist who created this design, has added "Fight Violence with Love" to his new website so people won't misinterpret the meaning, like he thinks has happened in a dispute over banning a knock-off version of the shirt at Markesan High School. (Photo: Thomas Deininger)

Schoenecker is represented by Georgia gun rights expert lawyer John Monroe, who is being paid by Wisconsin Carry, Inc., a group to which Schoenecker's parents belong. In addition to the LOVE shirt, Koopman has also banned one that reads "Celebrate Diversity" above images of many different guns.

The suit claims Koopman violated Schoenecker's right to freedom of expression and his due process rights because the principal could just decide which shirts to ban on a case-by-case basis.

Schoenecker's suit says he likes guns and sport shooting and "believes in the value to society of personal possession of arms as guaranteed by the Second Amendment," and that the banned shirts depict guns and other weapons in "a non-violent, non-threatening manner."

A spokesman for Wisconsin Carry said tolerance for Schoenecker's T-shirts evaporated after the Parkland, Fla., school shooting.

The suit seeks a court order allowing Schoenecker to wear the shirts and the costs of bringing the case.

Neither Koopman nor the administrator of the Markesan school district returned messages last week.