

Community Reacts to Anonymous Harassment

BY LISA SUFRIN
AND RUTH HENSON

Anonymous notes slipped under the door of a student living in Brecon used "obscene language to threaten the student and insult her lesbian sexual orientation," according to a letter distributed to members of the bi-college community last Monday. Signed by President Mary Patterson McPherson, Dean Karen Tidmarsh and Joyce Miller, Director for Institutional Diversity, the letter described an incident of anonymous sexual harassment just before Spring Break.

Letters to inform the community are part of the college's "Procedures for Dealing with Anonymous Harassment" which require that, "with the consent of the person or persons making the complaint, and with due



Bryn Mawr students attended a rally yesterday to express outrage at the recent harassing notes. Photo by Dan Marks.

consideration for the safety of the complainants and of the community, the incident will be reported to the entire community in the hope of both ending the reported harassment and deterring similar incidents in the future."

The student received notes on two successive days before vacation which were "immediately

reported ... to the Department of Public Safety and the Dean's Office." According to Steven Heath, Director of Public Safety, the first note was received on March 7, at approximately 7:00 p.m. At this time, Heath said that, "officers took an interview [with the student], and conducted a preliminary investigation."

After the student returned from break, she received a third note, this time in her mailbox. Heath indicated that this note was not sent through campus mail.

He said that at this time, "we [Public Safety] are committing a tremendous amount of time to this investigation." Public Safety is examining cases of similar harassment which go back to 1988, looking for similarity in content and penmanship of the notes. Heath added that because this is "an active investigation," there is a lot of information that cannot be disclosed. Heath did however say that it is clear that the notes have been sent by a member of the Bryn Mawr community and "most likely a resident of Brecon."

In terms of the legal implications of this offense, Heath said that, "the criminal charge for (continued on page 7)

A Bryn Mawr student addresses yesterday's gathering in front of the Campus Center. Photo by Dan Marks.

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this is at least harassment by communication." Since the notes contain "some implied threats which may well rise to the level of the criminal statute of terroristic threats," Heath said that these incidents are being taken very seriously by Public Safety and says that, "I do not believe that if the offender is identified that these actions will be casually viewed by the administration."

Heath said that if the guilty party is identified, the student involved has the option of handling the situation "internally" or she can file criminal charges.

In (overwhelming) support for the student who has been victimized by these harassing notes, many students came together last Monday to discuss the situation and organize activities

communicating solidarity with the student. According to senior Donna Uettwiller, who was present at the meeting, "everyone that was concerned about the notes" attended.

As a result of the meeting, different activities have been organized on campus. A march and rally held Thursday was attended by over one hundred students and faculty members. Banners and a time line illustrating the acts of harassment perpetrated against students over the past four years have been displayed in the Centennial Campus Center. Uettwiller stated that "no central group [on campus] on purpose" is the sole organizer of the activities. "Everyone is interested; they are doing what they want to do, so it gets done."

The Unrelenting Cycle of Harassment

Well, it's taken a while, but the Yahoos have crawled out of the woodwork at Bryn Mawr once again for their annual harassment fest. And this year's target is ... lesbians. We seem to have completed a four-year cycle. If I remember correctly, it was Jews last year, Hispanics the year before, and lesbians again the year before that.

In any case, the usual "we condemn harassment" letter from the administration was looking depressingly familiar as I pulled it out of my mailbox yesterday morning. By now, I bet they have a form letter saved on a disk somewhere in the President's office — all they need to do is call it up on their computer screen when the annual event occurs and type in the name of the appropriate targeted group.

These administration letters always have the same structure: Description of incident that they are sorry to have to report followed by discussion of efforts to hunt down perpetrator and bring him/her/it to justice followed by statement about community principles of tolerance and respect.

This message has evolved from years of experience dealing with

such cases, and represents a shift from the philosophy (espoused during the lesbian harassment incidents four years ago) that these affairs should be hushed up to the current policy of immediately publicly condemning them and emphasizing community values.

This current position is a step on the right track, since it allows a focus, not on the damaging act which can never be erased, but on the power of community affirmation. But to a certain extent, this message is also one of frustrated powerlessness: If we find the person who is sending harassing notes, it will be because of luck, not because of any absolute power to do so. And we can establish community values in as many Honor Code clauses and Plenary resolutions as we want, but such statements don't guarantee our safety from this kind of ugliness.

The letter from President McPherson, Dean Tidmarsh, and Dean Miller that went out to the community this week reads, in part, "While we cannot eliminate the cruelty, anger, and fear that lie behind harassment, we can at least reaffirm that a Bryn Mawr or Haverford education is committed

to attempting to change the climate of ignorance and misunderstanding about human differences which such behavior reflects."

If we're powerless to eliminate this kind of harassment and its causes, we should also take a further step in our efforts to affirm ourselves. We need to use these occasions not only as chances to reaffirm community values, but as chances to reaffirm the values and identity of the specific group being singled out as well.

This kind of reaffirmation is being undertaken by students on campus who are, among other things, plastering the campus with pink triangles, some of which — oops — were painted on the sidewalks and are consequently being removed by Physical Plant at the direction of the administration. I hope that we can find a way for all levels of the

community — faculty, staff, administration and students — to join this effort. Perhaps the Deans and the President could scrawl triangles around campus with some nice, easily removable pink chalk.

We disempower the faceless perpetrators of these incidents of harassment if we keep our attention focused not on them, but on their victims and on the community. Like most people here, I want justice, but the identity of the specific plagiarist of bathroom stalls who felt compelled to share his/her/its angry musings about his/her/its penis with a lesbian Brecon resident isn't my primary concern. Anyone in this community with the vocabulary of a twelve year-old boy combined with the grip on reality of a character out of *American Psycho* won't get too far in life anyway. The history of harassment at Bryn Mawr over the last four years proves not only that focusing on these people is usually futile, but that once one of them is gone, others will rise to take his/her/its place.

A month ago, at Plenary, Bryn Mawr students passed a resolution urging the college to set up a committee to explore all aspects of campus life pertaining to issues of

sexual assault and harassment. One of the lesbians who received harassing notes under her door four years ago spoke, in tears, about the pain of her experience and the frustration she felt when told by the administration that she should keep things quiet. She received a standing ovation. The resolution passed unanimously.

Perhaps the author of the current series of notes was hiding among the 388 people who voted for that resolution. But that individual doesn't matter as much as the fact that we stood together as a community and showed our support for the victims of such harassment.

Unfortunately, these Yahoos are like roaches — they crawl back inside the walls and never completely die out no matter how hard you try to exterminate them. We can expect this cycle of anonymous harassment to continue. But the current situation gives us a chance to look back at the past four years, see how we've made progress in our method of dealing with these incidents, and plan for even more effective community responses in the future.

Bryn
Mawr
Clea
Benson

Clea Benson is a Bryn Mawr senior.

BMC Addresses Harassment

"Student was asked to take a leave from the college"

By Amy Forster

A letter soon to be released to Bryn Mawr students will state, as President of the College Mary Patterson McPherson summarized, "We have identified someone who we believe may well have been involved" with the homophobic harassment letters slipped under the door of a Brecon resident.

While Dean of the College Karen Tidmarsh expressed satisfaction with the conduct of the investigation, affirming, "The investigation couldn't have been more successful — the students asked to be cooperative couldn't have been more so," members of the community who had taken action to educate about the harassment incidents were angry at the decision to keep most details of the investigation confidential.

In a meeting of 30 concerned community members Monday night in the Campus Center, an informed student expressed that, "It is excruciating to know the identity [of the harasser], and not be able to say it." Another student commented, "That doubt [about the harasser's identity] just makes everyone more anxious." Despite anger at the identity being kept confidential, there was satisfaction expressed with how the search was conducted by Director of Public Safety Steven Heath.

Prefacing her remarks at Monday's gathering by saying, "This is filtered by what I can tell you," senior Joanna Ho gave a

brief sketch of the releasable information. From handwriting samples provided to two forensic experts, the identity of the harasser was narrowed down from three suspects to the person now believed to have committed the homophobic acts. The vague language of statements about the identity of the harasser is due to the fact that there remains no hard proof of the suspected student's guilt. "The student was asked to take a leave from the college and complied," Tidmarsh said.

Tidmarsh views the outcry for the release of the student's identity to be contrary to fundamental principles of Bryn Mawr. "This community puts a high value on confidentiality," she explained, citing Honor Board proceedings as an example. "It's hard for me to envision any situation in which there would be a full disclosure. In a different situation I think that these people [asking for the release of the harasser's name] would want their own or a friend's privacy respected."

Another justification for the release of the name which was cited by the upset students was that the silence, according to one student, "jeopardizes innocent people" who may be suspected of involvement. Some students questioned the administration's understanding of the fact that people will, in the words of one, "put two and two together" and spread the information. Tidmarsh acknowledged that this would

probably occur, and said, "I wish that people would not participate in a lot of rumor-passing and speculation, but I don't see that influencing my role in protecting the privacy of the person."

All involved acknowledge that an issue raised by the harassment is the effectiveness of the harassment policy. Students at Monday's meeting remarked that the policy lacks provisions governing what happens after a harasser is caught.

"I think there are some clear omissions," agreed Dean Tidmarsh. As perceived problems she pointed out that the language of the policy seems to put the responsibility of confrontation on the harassed party, which has obviously uncomfortable consequences. Tidmarsh said that she believed that such incidents were the concern of the community at large, and therefore others could intervene on the victim's behalf. Other needs Tidmarsh cited were to make the options of the victim more clear, and to acknowledge the rights of the accused.

Another problem with implementing the policy, Tidmarsh explained, is that some of the stages have never been used. She confirmed her belief that, "it needs to be worked through again pretty thoroughly... but I don't think it has gotten in the way of this investigation."

A committee to re-work the policy will be set up this summer or early next fall.