

FORUM

Board betrayed *Emerald's* ideals

By Chris Bouneff

The student news staff at the *Oregon Daily Emerald*, and all the student journalists who have ever spent late nights writing last-minute stories or putting the finishing touches on the next day's paper at 2:30 in the morning, lost a strong ally Monday evening.

Commentary

Jean Ownbey, head of the *Emerald* business office for the past 14 years, was forced out by the *Emerald* Board of Directors Monday night. This "personnel decision" will not be noticeable to readers, nor will it affect the paper's news coverage. However, it is being noticed by those of us who have dedicated long hours to this paper.

To us, and to the many student journalists who have been employed at the *Emerald* during the past 14 years, Jean has been a fixture. To us, she has always been more than the person who handles payroll and does the corporate taxes. Instead, Jean has been the guardian of our independence, and, most importantly, our friend.

During the past 14 years, Jean has pleaded our case before the journalism school and fought off suggestions that the paper hire an adviser or a GTF from the journalism department to read copy before it's printed.

While many professors in the journalism school will claim Jean's resistance to an adviser created a rift between the school and the *Emerald*, those of us on the news staff have always appreciated her obstinacy. The lack of an adviser or other authority figure has only aided our learning experience because it has forced us to act more responsibly.

It's not that we couldn't have hired an adviser if we wanted one, but year after year, students have decided against

one. We learn more when we're completely responsible for our work. We can learn journalism school techniques at the J-school; Jean always understood this.

For myself, what is also distressing about Jean's dismissal is that corporate America won out over an individual. Fourteen years is a lengthy stay in any field; the least an employee could expect is a little loyalty from the company he or she has given valuable years to.

This is not the case here at the *Oregon Daily Emerald* because, in the board's view, this college daily, supposedly in business to serve and train University students, must be run in a manner similar to Union Carbide or General Motors — if the corporation's \$1 billion profit drops by \$1 million, then somebody must be laid off.

But the *Emerald* is not an IBM or AT&T; it is a small collegiate paper and should be thought of as such. As a corporation, we are unruly, undisciplined and unstructured, but we are still successful.

Seeing Jean, who understood students better than any of the professional managers at the *Emerald*, dismissed so that the paper could fit the corporation blueprint in Encyclopaedia Britannica is depressing for those of us who still believe "corporate interests" should never supersede human factors.

And it is the human factor that the *Emerald* board chose to ignore by saluting an employee of 14 years with the news her contract with the corporation would not be renewed.

That brings up a final point, which is that as a member of the board of directors, I feel I have somehow deceived Jean and that I have been deceived by several board members.

During the *Emerald's* search for its first-ever general manager last spring, many of the news staff, including myself,

believed board members' assurances that Jean would not become the victim of a hatchet-job once a general manager was hired.

We were concerned because the general manager was being asked to perform some of the duties that Jean performed during the last 14 years, but when we brought our concern to the board, we were told that there would always be a place for Jean and that we should "join the team" by fully supporting the board.

And in private conversations with several board members, I was told that the board was not looking to fire anyone. The corporation needed a general manager for structural reasons, to bring more order to the company.

But it seemed those assurances were only empty promises, as order arrived in the form of a new general manager and 14 years of experience was pushed out. It is in this way that I feel I have somehow deceived a valued friend. I believed what others were saying, making me guilty of deception through ignorance and naivete.

With the deed done, the *Emerald* continues on. The paper, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary of independence from University supervision, will continue to publish daily.

But this occurrence has made us re-examine why we are working for this paper and what our goals should be. We fear for the autonomy of the news department, the only completely student-run division at the *Emerald*.

We also fear for the paper itself as it moves farther away from being a student publication and closer to being only a publication aimed at students.

Chris Bouneff is the *Emerald's* news editor and editorial staff representative to the board of directors.

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