



Freshman Lauren Sinclair signs a door Friday at the EMU Amphitheater that speaks out against what an Emerald columnist wrote recently. Amanda Cowan/Emerald

Controversial Emerald column disputed

The article initiated debate over sexism and social responsibility

By Teri Meeuwsen
Oregon Daily Emerald

A wooden door asking if Oregon Daily Emerald editors care more about grammar "than words that perpetuate violence against women and racism," was delivered to the Emerald office Friday afternoon after a meeting discussing a column that generated debate about the First Amendment, social responsibility and the safety of women.

The door, covered with supportive signatures, asked the public to "open the door to an Emerald free of racism and sexism."

On April 2, a column written by Emerald columnist Vince Mediros used words like "chickie," "prey" and "violent" to describe a spring break trip to Mexico.

"I was extremely concerned when I read the article and the general sophomoric feel of it," said Paula McGuerty, a pre-major in planning and public management. "I think that what comes out of this could be a general raising of the consciousness around issues of violence against women and their objectification."

At the meeting on Friday, women's safety advocates, the editor in chief of the Emerald, Ryan Frank, and its two editorial editors, Stephanie Knowlton and Kameron Cole, discussed the editorial process, the results of the column, what effect it has on society and what positive ideas and actions can be taken from it.

"The meeting was constructive in the sense that it allowed everyone to exchange ideas and opinions face to face," Cole said. "I don't think anyone left with any fundamental changes in opinion, but ultimately, I think that is less important than gaining some sense of the other position."

The meeting began with the reading of a letter written by Mediros giving an apology and reasons why the column was written.

"The only intention of the article was to celebrate, in a humorous and lighthearted way, spring break as an important part of the college experience," the letter read. "It was never, by no means, my intention to condone sexism,

or any other conduct that may constitute a chauvinistic, sexist or racist act."

Journalism professor Debra Merskin said the letter was as outrageous as the column was.

"If he thinks of himself as a journalist, there's no excuse for language and word choice because that's his job," she said.

But a larger issue surrounding the column is what each issue of the Emerald looks like as a stand-alone product, she said. Each issue represents the University, the people who go and live here, the people who write the paper and the voice of the campus.

"So when someone picks it up, and it's the only issue they ever see, what is life like, and what are the attitudes at the University of Oregon based on in that issue?" she asked.

Kyla Schuller, an ASUO Women's Center advocate and the person who called for the meeting, said she had to deal with parents of prospective freshmen who were visiting campus when she was posting fliers about the column and Mediros' word choice.

"We had parents asking about it and saying they were glad that we were doing this," said Schuller, a major in comparative literature. "It was embarrassing to me. It might have been the only time they set foot on this campus."

Women's Center Director Lisa Foisey said there is a percentage of people on or around campus who feel the way about women portrayed in the column.

"I think this incident is not isolated," she said. "And because it's not isolated, it shows more of what is happening ... with many of the students here, and it just happened that Vince got published, which is worse, but I think these words are quite common."

Foisey said she was interested in examining higher education to see if it offers students a place to look at their moral and civic duties.

Chris Demaske, a graduate teaching fellow in journalism, said the Emerald needs to take personal responsibility for what was written and was interested in what the Emerald staff's philosophy is on the balance between First Amendment rights and social responsibility.

Frank said the Emerald doesn't have a set policy, but that social responsibility outweighs the First

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Amendment.

"Beyond the First Amendment you have a responsibility to your readers and your community," Frank said. "And when a portion such as this is outraged at one story, it's something we naturally have to consider, and it's something we discussed after the fact and before the fact. It worries me that people think we're not giving this enough attention. Personally, I'm taking a proactive role in discussion."

The balance between moral duties or social responsibility and the First Amendment or the freedom of speech has been a tricky one for journalists during the movement toward having responsibility to the community, Frank said.

"It's not just something the Emerald has to deal with, but newspapers everywhere have to wrestle with," he said. "It's a tough battle because it's a legal right to provide a forum, but what is discussed shouldn't be damaging and hurtful."

Ideas generated at the meeting to deal with the effects of the column, social responsibility and the safety and objectification of women included changes in the editorial policy, creation of standards for columnists and a series of lectures discussing it.

Frank said he couldn't say what tangible things will happen or what will be printed in the Emerald in the next week but said there will be discussion about the policies and standards surrounding columns and discussion about social responsibility throughout the newsroom.

"[The ideas] all had some validity, but it's too soon to say what's feasible," he said. "It's something we'll take very, very seriously and will continue to address it in the newsroom."

Teri Meeuwsen can be reached via e-mail at meeuwsen@gladstone.uoregon.edu

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