

Friday, May 14, 2004

Austin wants to be cruising in cool red VW

University Media Relations Director Pauline Austin has worked in the Media Relations office for 10 years. Her primary responsibility is to connect reporters to University officials who have the information they need. She sat down with the Emerald for Quick Quacks — a short question-and-answer session aimed at giving readers an expedient look at campus and community members' thoughts.

ODE: How come you don't use your first name, Mary?

Austin: Because my mother didn't use my first name. I believe, this is my own interpretation of family folklore — in Catholic families all the girls are named Mary Catherine, Mary Pauline, Mary Kate — you don't call them Mary because they're all Marys.

ODE: What's the most rewarding part of being a communications director?

Austin: Working with reporters, because reporters are looking for information. Part of my long career was being an assignment editor. That allowed me to be on the other end of that line trying to find

someone. I was trying to find an expert, I was trying to find someone to interview. Now I'm on the other side and I still like doing it. I like to understand what people are looking for.

ODE: If you were not in PR, what job would you do?

Austin: I'd would be doing a job in news writing.

ODE: What's the most challenging part of dealing with reporters?

Austin: Deadlines. The same challenge that you have. We had a story the other day that everyone would have been happy to talk about, but none of the people who knew about it were available by the time of the reporter's deadline.

ODE: What's your comfort food?

Austin: My comfort food? Things with salt, sugar and cheese, not necessarily in combination.

ODE: Who's the one person you'd like to meet and why?

Austin: As a reporter I met an awful lot of people. Well, I'm just going to go for the silly. I'd like to meet Brad Pitt.

ODE: Why?

Austin: I think he's hot. (She laughs) I don't always have to meet someone intellectual ... I met a lot of people.

ODE: What book are you reading right now?

Austin: I think I'm reading a mystery. My reading tends to be in little snatches and pieces. I think I'm reading a mystery, I don't remember the name of it — "Birds of Prey" is the name of it and it's by a mystery writer out of Seattle, a woman who uses initials.

ODE: What's your dream car and where would you drive it?

Austin: It depends on which dream we're talking about. Well, it will be a convertible, and it might be a VW convertible. First car I ever owned was a VW. But ... because of where I live it might be a sunroof VW, so it would be more pleasant when it rains all the time. Red.

ODE: So where would you drive it?

Austin: I would drive it someplace where I could easily show it off. I think the first place I would take it is to my grandson's high school, so he would know that I'm cooler than he thinks I am. Perhaps he would think I'm not cool at all. By the way, his brother says I may not say the word cool because older people don't know how to say it right.

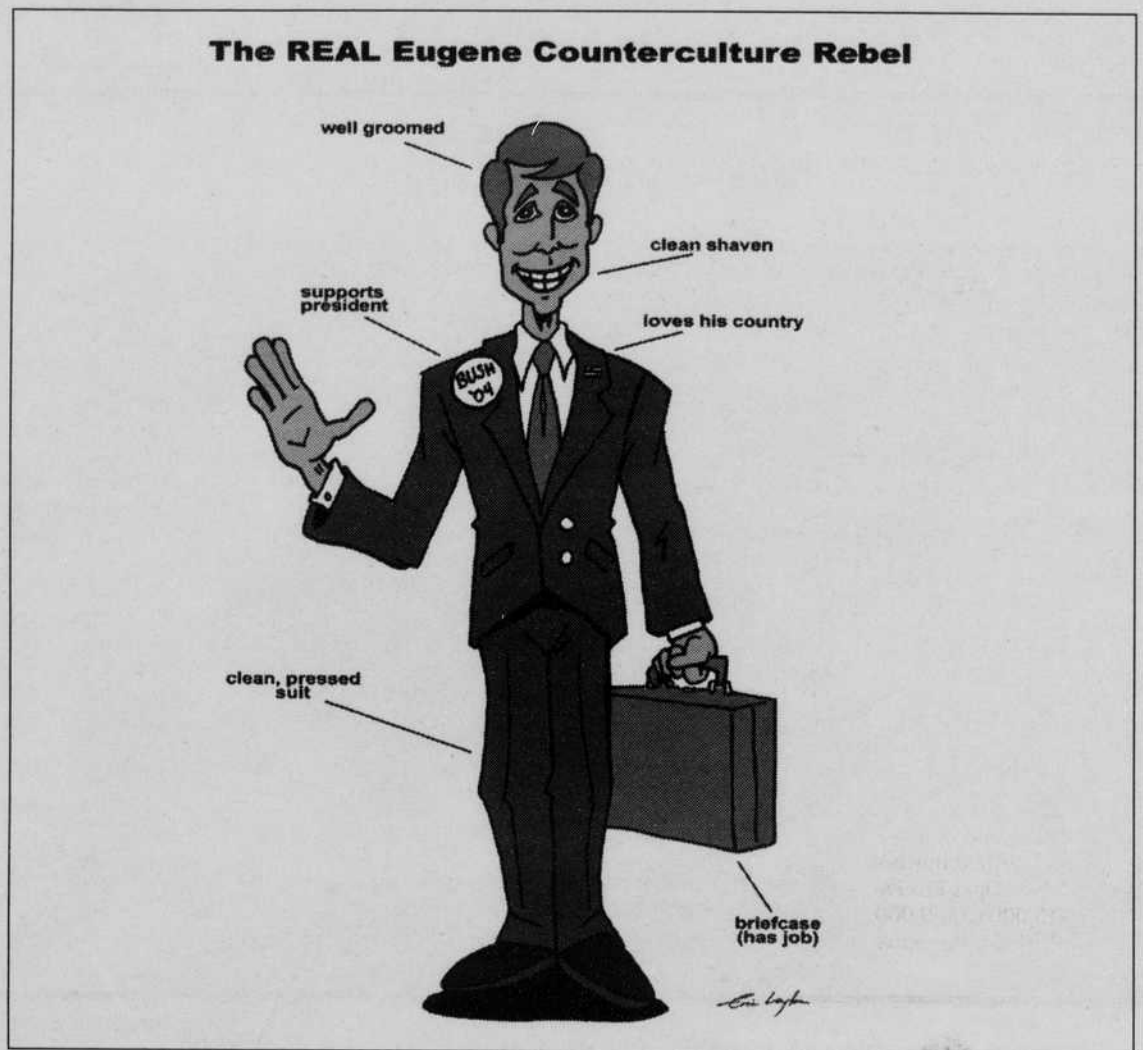
ODE: Where can we find you on a Saturday night?

Austin: Most often, you would find me home watching television, but you might find me at a performance at the Hult Center, at one of the plays we have down here. I really like drama. Or visiting with a friend, playing Scrabble.

ODE: What's the weirdest thing you've learned about the University?

Austin: I like this place so much. Nothing here has struck me as really weird — interesting, maybe odd sometimes, but not weird. This is a place where so many different kinds of things come together and make this great mix. We worry a lot about whether we have diversity, but diversity doesn't just mean skin color. We have all kinds of philosophies that come together, we have all kinds of approaches to life and all kinds of things you can learn and sometimes things get mixed up and really interesting.

The REAL Eugene Counterculture Rebel



Eric Layton Illustration

Disclosure informs readers

If you visited the Emerald Web site earlier this week — no doubt to read one of the masterfully crafted opinion pieces that grace this page in print — you might've noticed that getting around the site was slow. Very slow.

After being linked from the Drudge Report — a news and opinion Web site run by Internet muckraker supreme Matt Drudge — throngs of readers visited the site to read a recap of the University's annual Ruhl Lecture.

Los Angeles Times Editor John Carroll delivered the embattled lecture, titled "The Wolf in Reporter's Clothing: The Rise of Pseudo-Journalism in America." Carroll spent much of his time lambasting journalism and Fox News in particular, blasting commentators such as Bill O'Reilly for misleading their audiences rather than informing them.

"All over the country there are offices that look like newsrooms and there are people in those offices that look for all the world just like journalists, but they are not practicing journalism," Carroll explained. "They regard the audience with a cold cynicism. They are practicing something I call pseudo-journalism, and they view their audience as something to be manipulated."

But many of the authors of the 299 feedback posts (as of press time) to the superficially innocuous story see the modern world of journalism differently.

Charles G., a business owner from Tonasket, Wash., defended Fox News in his feedback post (No. 16): "I beg to differ with the esteemed John S. Carroll. There is only one breath of fresh air, truth, honesty and integrity practicing the craft of journalism in the major media today and that IS Fox News! Hence their immense success."

Potis B. (No. 41) directed the blame for this "false journalism" at Carroll and his colleagues.

"Sadly, this report about Carroll doesn't

mention WHY there is a vastly successful market for so-called 'pseudo-journalism.' Maybe it's because Mr. Carroll and his ilk have badly mismanaged their stewardship of 'real journalism'?"

Reporters are products of their own time and circumstances. The political attitudes of a reporter who would pass as reasonably objective and nonpartisan today might have blacklisted him in a politically distant time or place.



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The lesson? That fair, honest reporting is difficult, but that truly objective journalism in the conventional sense is downright impossible. Any given reporter infuses his stories with a hidden, even unconscious, collection of values, expectations and philosophies. Newspaper space is limited, and so is readers' time, forcing writers to ask with every story, "Which fact is most important? Which details are most relevant to the story?" But even questions as fundamental to the journalistic process as these are problematic, because answers to these questions are informed through individual ethical judgments and experience and by notions of causality.

"Objectivity cannot be equated with mental blankness," late Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould argued. "Rather, objectivity resides in recognizing your preferences and then subjecting them to especially harsh scrutiny — and also in a willingness to revise or abandon your theories when the tests fail (as they usually do)."

As in the world of science, the difference

between fair and unfair in journalism lies in vigilant, steadfast inspection of one's own prejudices. Faithful news reporters must eternally bear the double burden of striving to expunge bias from their writing while always admitting openly that, despite these efforts, their products are ultimately subjective.

In my favorite feedback post to the story, No. 189, the prudently moderate Don P. from Connecticut suggested, "Perhaps such journalistic Edens are impossible in modern times. We may have to settle for equal representation of opposing viewpoints."

If individual reporters ought to admit their biases, then it should be a moral imperative that editors and news organizations do the same. If they won't seek to correct their biases — an unlikely proposition, given the political stakes that affect news media — they should at least admit their positions, so that we can spend more time talking about the news and less time bickering about it. Simply put, Fox News should concede its mostly right-of-center tilt, and the Los Angeles Times should acknowledge its left-of-center slant.

But this proposal is almost less likely, and so the onus of intellectual responsibility returns to the viewer and reader. When consuming media, we must consider each source and story critically, and, time allowing, get our news from a variety of sources. Moreover, we must maintain a mind open to new facts, new interpretations and, ultimately, new ideas.

Futurist Alvin Toffler warns us of the most serious danger of the alternative.

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

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 represent those of the Emerald.