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viewpoint BY ARIEL HOWLAND

Glitterbombed!

Dan Savage targeted for being transphobic

On Nov. 1 an activist “glitterbombed” Dan Savage during the filming of his MTV show *Savage U* during his stop at the UO. According to Portland Indymedia: *During this session, the operative leapt to the stage and poured glitter over Dan’s head as they shouted, ‘Dan Savage is a transphobe!’ As they turned tail, they added, ‘Glitterbomb courtesy of the Dan Savage Welcoming Committee,’ and just before they got out the door, ‘He’s a racist and misogynist and a rape-apologist, too!’ The operative then fled the scene.* People reacting to this news have had varied reactions, everything from confusion and anger to amusement and ambivalence.



So why has Savage, the sex advice columnist and prominent gay rights activist, been glitterbombed? Savage has been criticized repeatedly for years for making ignorant and bigoted statements related to sexual violence, people with disabilities, bisexuals, people of color, people of size (what most people call fat), transgender people and women. His responses to these criticisms have included sincere apologies with efforts to make amends, ignoring criticism, defensiveness, half-hearted pseudo-apologies, hostility and name calling. To be fair, some of the criticisms directed at him have also involved name-calling. I offer a few examples to highlight Savage’s shortcomings.

After the passage of California’s Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriage in 2008, Savage, like many other white gay men, put heavy blame on African-American voters for getting Prop. 8 passed. In Savage’s words: “I do know this, though: I’m done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there — and they’re out there, and I think they’re scum — are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color.”

As a white man, even a gay white man, Savage is not in a position to judge how much racism is directed at African Americans from gay white men. Besides it being misguided to focus on the power of a small minority of voters, it is racist scapegoating that plays into the divisive tactics of the 1 percent.

Although Savage has at times used his influence to help the transgender community he has also repeatedly acted offensively. In 2010 Savage pretended that Republican Washington State Attorney General Rob McKenna was transgender as a way to insult him. This is similar to teasing a boy by saying he throws like a girl. It doesn’t just insult the target it also insults the people in the comparison. He has also repeatedly used the transphobic slurs “tranny” and “shemale” in his column. These are words that are used to harass and demean trans people they are not appropriate for casual use by anyone who isn’t transgender.

So was the glitterbomb a good idea? I am grateful for the chance at dialogue and reflection. I predict that Savage’s career is not going to be fazed much by this glitterbombing incident. In a culture that is constantly attacking people’s sexualities, family/relationship models, choices, identities, etc., it can be more than a little comforting to have an intelligent, funny and articulate defender, especially one who has a national presence. However, for our own good we need to be honest about the public figures who have championed our cause.

Despite devoting an entire opinion column to discussing Savage’s flaws, I do not hate him. In fact I am a fan of his column. I am of the opinion that you can be disappointed or angry about a person’s views and actions while still enjoying his creative endeavors and/or work (Mel Gibson, anyone?). When enjoyment of a prejudiced person’s work involves financial support then things get a little more iffy. All that said, getting defensive and attacking the bringer of bad news isn’t appropriate. As Tobi Hill-Meyer of Bilerico.com puts it: “Dan Savage tells his critics to patiently wait for him while it gets better. This glitterbomb is one of many responses that demand, ‘Make it better.’”

Ariel Howland is a local activist and public speaker who identifies as a trans woman. She can be reached at phowland@uoregon.edu



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