

# Oregon teens say it's time to reset political rhetoric

## Moving on from name-calling and nastiness

By JANET EASTMAN  
The Oregonian

ASHLAND — Three student leaders at Ashland High School say the bubble they lived in since they were babies has burst. The presidential campaigns delivered endless daggers of heated rhetoric, name-calling and nastiness.

They saw it play out on their campus. Arguments got personal. Teachers had to shut it down.

The student leaders worried that the high-temperature campaign talk might never cool down.

They were concerned that mocking people for their race, religion or physical appearance could be perceived as something to aspire to, "be seen as presidential," said Evan Mouldoux, the school's senior class president.

In response, Mouldoux and student body co-presidents Amelia Zeve and Kate Joss-Bradley wrote an open letter on the day after the election that spelled out existing school district policies, acceptable conduct and the Grizzlies' culture that aims toward kindness and respect for all.

The timing hit a nerve. Oregon schools have reported that there was a rise in racial attacks during the election cycle. And students responded.

Hundreds of Forest Grove High School students left campus after someone strung a political banner over posters displayed for the school's Unity Week. The teenager owning up to the banner later apologized.

Two students at Silverton High School were suspended for threatening behavior at an Election Day rally.

While Portland Public Schools students walked out and held sit-ins and Sprague High School students in Salem had a demonstration, the Ashland students felt it best to collect their thoughts and offer a strongly worded letter that rein-

forced that there was no tolerance for what they call hate speech.

### Widely circulated

After posting the letter, which has been widely circulated in social media, they went to work within their school district.

"We want the elementary schoolkids to see leaders in the Ashland community and in the U.S. at large as leaders who are being positive and showing that oppression is something you can stand up against," Zeve said.

**'We are disgusted in general by the way the entire political campaigns went.'**

### Evan Mouldoux

Ashland High School's senior class president

Made clear was that recent regrettable acts were not only happening on the national stage but even in liberal-leaning Ashland. In June, a homeless man shouted about the KKK while threatening a black actress with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

In response, Black Lives Matter signs are still visible on yards, Shakespeare festival members walked in the July Fourth parade wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts and festival management issued a statement that it was not an isolated incident: "The sad truth is that people of color often feel unwelcome and unsafe in our beautiful town and region. It's time to talk about it and to take action."

In the summer, a downtown Ashland bookstore owner said she was unjustifiably seen as racist for displaying in her front window "Little Black Sambo," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and other books banned for racial reasons.

She closed her store in October.

On the high school campus, longstanding programs against bullying and sexual assault have been augmented. High school students wear red T-shirts and wristbands that say Got Consent?

Gay students are still harassed, say the student leaders.

### Reset the rhetoric

They say it's well past time to reset the rhetoric and better define what's political opinion versus personal attacks that degrade someone's race, class, gender or sexuality, Joss-Bradley said.

Speaking at the high school office, Mouldoux, Zeve and Joss-Bradley, all 17, said they realize they are privileged.

"Ashland is a bubble," Zeve said. "It's a predominately white, upper-middle class, very liberal little town right on the edge of California."

For this and other reasons, they said they were shocked this year to hear hate speech from Ashland residents and on national news.

"We are disgusted in general by the way the entire political campaigns went," Mouldoux said. "Still, it would have been easier to remain neutral and not affirm what we stand for... But we need to stand up and say hate speech is not right."

Their letter, which was not sanctioned by the school district, high school faculty or other students before it was posted, has been shared on Facebook and is causing ripples in Oregon and beyond the state's borders.

The letter states that all students have the "right to be loved, to be respected, and to be treated equitably regardless of background, race, ethnicity, class, creed, political affiliation, religion, gender, sexual and romantic identity, ability, and physical appearance."

It continues: "As Grizzlies, we condemn hate speech and bullying, and will not stand idly by if we witness it. We call AHS students, staff, and community members to find the courage to interrupt oppressive behavior and to remain respectful and loving towards all."



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Ashland High student leaders Evan Mouldoux, center, Amelia Zeve, right, and Kate Joss-Bradley speak openly about their privileged life and the need to stop hate speech on campus and in their city.

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