

A case of mistaken identity

Lewiston woman targeted for posts by petty officer in Virginia with same name

Elaine Williams/Lewiston Tribune

Rachel Marie Triplett of Lewiston inadvertently landed in the crossfire of the national debate on racism when a post with her name appeared on Facebook and created a case of mistaken identity.

The comments came from a different woman more than 2,500 miles away with the same name. The other woman is a petty officer assigned to the U.S. Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Va., medical center spokeswoman Christina Johnson said in an email.

But that didn't stop Triplett, a 23-year-old dialysis technician at Tri-State Memorial Hospital in Clarkston, from becoming the target of hundreds of messages sent to her Facebook page expressing anger toward the post's author.

The other woman's post reads in part: "Black lives DON'T Matter anymore than white lives, Asian lives, native American lives, Hispanic lives etc ... So shut the F up and if you got shot, you probably deserved it. End of story."

The post first appeared with a head and shoulders picture of the Virginia Triplett, but Johnson said she's wearing a Navy uniform in the version that's being widely circulated.

The post received more than 70,000 views online and triggered calls to Tri-State asking for the dismissal of the Triplett who works there, hospital spokeswoman Stephanie Field said.

Tri-State supports Triplett and plans to take extra precautions Friday when a Black Lives Matter rally is scheduled in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley, said Polly Knelson, vice president of the foundation and community relations at the hospital.

Officials at the hospital are worried about Spokane-based buses that could arrive for the Friday rally with passengers who may not realize that Tri-State's Triplett didn't write the post.

"People are angry enough that they want to start spitting fire at the first name that pops up," Knelson said.

The hospital and the valley's Triplett went to the media in hopes of dissolving the confusion and de-escalating the situation. That decision followed Triplett taking other steps such as reporting the problem to her supervisor, Facebook, the FBI, the police department and shifting her Facebook page to a different name.

"I am neutral about the situation," Triplett said. "I don't agree with some of the acting out people are doing during these movements, but I fully support the fact that they are standing up for things they feel they are being treated differently about."

Her first indication she had been pulled into the fray was when she started getting an unusually high number of friend requests on Facebook, most of which were from the East Coast.

Then she began receiving hundreds of messages, perhaps because both Triplettts have fair complections with dark hair. It didn't help that the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley Triplett is employed in Washington state and the other Triplett works in Virginia, which borders Washington, D.C.

Almost all of the messages were mean-spirited. Some contained expletives and warned that people would find her. Her mother and friends received similar messages, Triplett said.

Her mother was asked how could she raise such a scumbag and worse, Triplett said, noting no one has physically attacked her.

"It kind of worried me when they said they knew where I lived," Triplett said. "Other than that, I didn't take anything to heart. ... If (the messages) were from around here, I would probably be a little more concerned about it."

What will happen to the Triplett in Virginia is still unfolding. She declined a request for an interview through Johnson. The incident is being investigated by the chain of command and Johnson said any disciplinary action will be handled within the scope of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

The Navy supports its members posting on social media, but considers them to be representing the Navy if the connection is made directly or indirectly, Johnson said. Posts are also subject to certain standards.

"A sailor's social media activity falls under the exact same regulations and policies as the rest of the sailor's behavior and must be used responsibly," Johnson said.

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