

Racial slurs at WSU spark protests, discussion

Washington State University students call for culture of change on campus

Patrick Groves, Special to Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Some Washington State University students are demanding the termination of a fraternity and the expulsion of a student at the Pullman campus after an alleged incident in which racial slurs were directed at black women on Greek Row.

A WSU student, who has been identified only as a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity and the Interfraternity Counsel, the governing body of the male Greek system, allegedly told black women attending a Feb. 21 social event at the Phi Delta Theta house to "get the fuck out you nigger bitch."

The incident sparked minority students to protest Feb. 25 and led to a meeting Thursday between protest organizers, WSU administrators, including Dean of Students Jeff Guillory, and members of the Office for Student Standards and Accountability.

The protesters called for the termination of the fraternity house and the expulsion of the student, both plausible repercussions after the completion of a university investigation, administrators said. Other demands include cultural competency training for Greek houses, the reevaluation of curriculum satisfying the diversity credit requirement and the notification of alumni after discriminatory events.

Christina Sessoms, the president of the Black Student Union, said the slur robbed students of their safety and security at the university. She added it was not an isolated incident, but an example of a systemic problem at WSU.

"All of us have to now watch our back in fear of backlash and potential harm because we are the ones who are addressing a serious problem that is embedded in WSU culture," she said. "How is that fair?"

Phi Delta Theta President Samuel Lee agreed the slur was part of a larger campus issue and apologized during the meeting to the black community at the university. Members present stated the individual had been kicked out of the fraternity following the slurs. Lee declined to comment further after his public statement.

"I think that our membership is very disappointed in the member's actions," Lee told those in attendance Thursday. "We are fully ready and willing to work however we need to or however you deem necessary to resolve this."

The Greek leadership, made up of the Interfraternity and Panhellenic councils, issued a statement condemning the remarks. The groups also urged Greek houses to "hold themselves to a higher standard and create a welcoming environment."

Members of the black community created a nonviolent movement called Wake Up WSU following the slur. The group aims to promote racial and gender equality on campus.

"I learned that you can be educated at this university and still be ignorant," said Beniam Yetbarek, a senior management information systems major and a founding member of Wake Up WSU.

Yetbarek said the expulsion of the student as a singular event would not change culture. However, addressing concerns raised by Wake Up WSU and students of color can lead to a positive change.

"It's not just white versus black, it's people at a disadvantage," he said.

Guillory said the "underbelly" of WSU culture has not changed significantly since his undergraduate career at the institution in the 1960s, and he encouraged students to become involved in faculty, staff and student committees to change policy at the university.

"If you can change policy, you begin to change the rudiment of culture itself," he said. "I would really like to see once and for all, after all these years, an actual change in this culture taking place."

Some change could come through the campus climate report, which was released by WSU President Elson Floyd earlier this month. It features the implementation of diversity education programs for faculty, staff and students, a change in freshman curriculum and more effective policing methods of the College Hill area.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint," said Melynda Huskey, interim vice president of Student Affairs and the Dean of Students. "We've been working on these issues in a way for a long, long time. As the environment changes we've got to keep working on this. As the technology changes, we have to come up with new efforts."

Patrick Groves can be reached at editor@dnews.com.