

## ?Special Town Hall Meeting

November 11, 2008

8:00 pm

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*Comments/suggestions/ideas/fragments gleaned from the open forum...*

### **Michael Raposa's opening remarks:**

GOOD EVENING AND WELCOME TO THIS SPECIAL TOWN HALL MEETING. MY NAME IS MICHAEL RAPOSA AND, WITH MY FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE CAROLINA HERNANDEZ, I SERVE AS CO-CHAIR OF PRESIDENT GAST'S COUNCIL FOR EQUITY AND COMMUNITY.

THE CEC CONVENED A TOWN HALL MEETING IN SEPTEMBER AND IS PLANNING ANOTHER ONE IN DECEMBER—BOTH TO REPORT OUR OWN PLANS AND PROGRESS AND TO HEAR YOUR IDEAS. BUT THIS MEETING TODAY IS NOT A “CEC TOWN HALL MEETING.” WE DID NOT CONVENE IT NOR IS IT HAPPENING BECAUSE WE PLANNED IT. IT IS HAPPENING BECAUSE SLIGHTLY MORE THAN A DOZEN CONCERNED AND COURAGEOUS AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS, ACCOMPANIED BY SEVERAL OF THEIR MENTORS, WALKED TOGETHER TO PRESIDENT GAST'S OFFICE LAST FRIDAY MORNING AND ASKED HER FOR A MEETING.

THE REASON FOR THIS REQUEST WAS THEIR EXPERIENCE OF HOSTILE AND RACIST BEHAVIOR ON THE LEHIGH CAMPUS IN THE AFTERMATH OF LAST WEEK'S HISTORIC PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. PRESIDENT GAST RESPONDED BY IMMEDIATELY GIVING THEM HER ATTENTION, AND A RESPECTFUL AND PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE. ONE RESULT OF THAT MEETING WAS THE DECISION TO HAVE A BROADER DISCUSSION, WITH MORE TIME AND A GREATER NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS. THE CEC HAS BEEN PROUD TO HAVE A ROLE IN HELPING THESE STUDENTS AND PRESIDENT GAST TO FACILITATE THAT CONVERSATION, AND THAT IS THE REASON WHY WE ARE GATHERED HERE TONIGHT.

LEHIGH IS A GREAT UNIVERSITY AND I HAVE BEEN A PROUD MEMBER OF ITS FACULTY FOR NEARLY A QUARTER OF A CENTURY. BUT IT IS NOT A PERFECT UNIVERSITY AND IT IS CERTAINLY NOT A COMMUNITY WHERE EVERYONE FEELS INCLUDED, WELCOMED OR EVEN SAFE. JUST AS **BOTH** CANDIDATES CALLED FOR SWEEPING NATIONAL CHANGES IN THE RECENT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, WE HAVE TO WORK HARD—AND WORK TOGETHER—TO CHANGE LEHIGH, TO TRANSFORM THIS COMMUNITY INTO ONE THAT IS INCLUSIVE, HOSPITABLE, AND DIVERSE. THAT WILL NOT HAPPEN IMMEDIATELY, BUT WHAT **MUST** HAPPEN IMMEDIATELY IS THAT

ALL THE MEMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY SHOULD FEEL SAFE BEING HERE, SAFE LIVING HERE.

THE CEC IS COMMITTED TO MOVING THAT PROCESS OF CHANGE FORWARD—TONIGHT, IN MANY CONVERSATIONS TO FOLLOW, AND IN EFFECTIVE ACTION THAT WE HOPE WILL RESULT FROM SUCH DELIBERATION. WE WILL NEED YOUR HELP, YOUR INSPIRATION, AND IN MANY CASES YOUR LEADERSHIP (JUST AS IT WAS DISPLAYED BY A DOZEN STUDENTS LAST FRIDAY MORNING).

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR PRESIDENT GAST’S LEADERSHIP AND I WANT TO INVITE HER TO BEGIN THE DISCUSSION HERE THIS EVENING.

Co-facilitators: Ayanna Wilcher and Carolina Hernandez

Taped remarks were played of three female African-American students that told the stories of the hateful incidents that occurred on campus in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s victory.

A list of resolutions was presented by “a group of concerned black students” to President Gast and the CEC, and made available to attendees; the students expect a response from the administration. The resolutions covered six main topics:

1. Immediately revise the institutional language used in the address of issues on racism
2. Institution of a “Studies in Race” and “Studies in Gender” course requirement
3. Service learning requirement for all students
4. Annual IFC/PanHel accreditation requirement that involves extensive sensitivity training focusing on various dimensions of diversity (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.)
5. A diversity office headed by a chief diversity officer
6. Admissions question on the undergraduate application to assess applicants’ commitment to diversity

Strong opinions were shared by several students that curriculum changes, including mandatory diversity classes, are needed, possibly as part of freshman seminar. Other top institutions (our peers) have mandatory diversity courses—why not us? Raposa spoke of “diversity across the curriculum.”

But will changing the curriculum end all incidents, just like that? No—we need to fundamentally change the people.

Why did the administration not tout the historic election results on our website or in an email to campus? Why did it take these hateful incidents for Obama’s election to be mentioned? President Gast responded that it was up to the students to celebrate it on their own.

Race is a core part of our society. Together, we must change the culture on campus.

This isn’t just about students’ bad behavior: Example—a professor used the term “Blackie the Drug Dealer” in class.

Need to revamp the confronting intolerance/harassment reporting procedures on our website, which are convoluted and unrealistic. John Smeaton said this will be done promptly.

Sharon Basso: If we have a name of an offender, we go after them. If you are a victim, fine a name on the contact list and get in touch with them.

The harassers are not the majority—WE are!

Yaba Blay: Are we wrapped up in the legality or the morality? What is the crime, what is the punishment?

A white student raised in the projects said he is not a racist because he was exposed to other groups starting at an early age. Another student: If every face in your cell phone looks like you, that’s a problem! Make friends with people who don’t look like you.

In response to a student saying we need to get more involved with the South Side, Carolina pointed out that the Community Service Office last year logged over 50,000 hours of student volunteer service, including 120 tutors in local schools. If any student wants to get involved, they are more than welcome.

The racial issue on campus is not new, it did not just spring up. It's important to acknowledge that these ugly things are happening.

Problem: The people who really need to hear this are not here this evening.

Actively fighting harassment starts with all of us in this room. We must take the conversation outside this room and talk about race in our dorms and apartments and classrooms.

We need to teach each other how to confront the people who verbally attack.

What legacy will we leave? Ayanna: I am a witness to history? What are you?

Ted Morgan spoke of having NCBI (National Coalition Building Institute) come to campus to work with select groups of faculty, staff, and students.

There were also racist remarks directed to whites...it goes both ways.

Even racist jokes should be avoided; they reinforce stereotypes.

Students believe financial backing must come from the university. Is the administration ready to commit that way?

Education is all we have in this fight.

John McKnight invited students to the Multicultural Center over the lunch hour; "you will be challenged."

No one comes to all the lectures, guest speakers, etc., on campus—until someone is called a nigger, then the room is so full that we're breaking the fire codes!

We watch bigoted people graduate from Lehigh every year.

In Henry Odi's experience, this is the first time in 21 years that we have a roomful of people discussing race. We have an opportunity right now to make Lehigh greater than it is.

The onus is on all of us. What contribution will YOU make?

\*\*\*\*\*Estimated attendance: 450-500