

[Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2000]

Students receive threatening mail

The three students who got the letter said it points to a larger problem of racism in the university community.

By Daryl Lang
Collegian Staff Writer

In an anonymous act of racism, three Penn State students and one member of the Penn State Board of Trustees received threatening letters during the past several days, university officials said yesterday.

"We don't know anything about the people who sent this message except they're cowards," said Terrell Jones, vice-provost for educational equity.

At least one of the students had received a similar threat before, Jones said.

Penn State Police Services is working with the FBI, the office of the state Attorney General and the U.S. Postal Service to track down who sent the letters.

The letters were short, typed notes sent through the U.S. mail, said Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon. "It's just hate mail. The worst kind of stuff you'd expect to read," Mahon said.

Students who were targeted said the messages point to a larger problem of racism in the university community, Jones said.

"This is one of these trigger incidents that lets people know we have an issue," he said.

The three students appear to have been singled out because they were all quoted recently in Daily Collegian articles, Jones added.

Neither Jones nor Mahon would elaborate on what the messages said, but both said they contained typical racist rhetoric.

"While they're aimed at an individual, the message here is to tell the whole minority community 'You don't belong,'" Jones said.

Penn State President Graham Spanier expressed his anger toward the letters in a press release.

"We are committed to having an environment of respect and civility within our university, and we are going to do everything in our power to find the person responsible for sending these messages," Spanier said.

Dozens of minority students at Penn State received harassing e-mails from an anonymous character last fall who went by the name "The Patriot."

In addition, police investigated a racist flier that was discovered on the floor of a restroom in Paterno Library in January.

More recently, three black students reported that two white men threw rocks at them from the top of a residence hall building one night last month. Police charged two men who they say were involved in the rock throwing.

[Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2000]

Black Caucus, authorities confront racist mailings

By Daryl Lang
Collegian Staff Writer

Whoever sent the recent racist mailings left only a few tangible items: Four envelopes with Altoona postmarks and five chilling letters, at least one of which is printed in computer font that looks like dripping blood.

But just as a few carefully placed dynamite charges can topple a building, a few strategic acts of racial hatred can shake an entire community.

Today, members of the Penn State Black Caucus plan to gather at 5:30 p.m. in the HUB-Robeson Center for a press conference to speak about the letters and the general topic of racism at the university.

Meanwhile, police said yesterday there are few clues as to who might have sent the letters. "It's not easy," said Stewart Neff, a supervisor for Penn State Police Services.

The five letters targeted four people: A university trustee and three students, including one football player and a black student leader.

On Oct. 6, Black Caucus President LaKeisha Wolf received her first letter. In a statement yesterday, Wolf explained the events that have taken place since then.

After she opened the first letter, Wolf reported it to the police, who began investigating. About a week later, she got a second envelope containing two letters, one addressed to her and one targeting another student.

The letters are highly personal and threaten violence. The Black Caucus has begun circulating copies of one letter, a ten-line rant of anti-black racism. "You keep your trap shut or we'll shut it for you!" is one of the mildest statements made in the letter. Much of the letter is made up of profanity and racial slurs.

Two other people reported receiving similar letters. So far, the shock has spread far beyond the four immediate victims.

In her statement, Wolf wrote that black students here have become fearful for their safety. In addition, there is a sense that these letters indicate a bigger problem. "Black students at Penn State are sick and tired of having to defend their reasons for attending the university and for simply being who they are," Wolf wrote.

Next week, the Black Caucus is holding a special forum on racism at 8:30 p.m. on Oct. 26 in the Pollock Rec Room. Wolf says the university administration has responded appropriately to the letters so far.

Penn State President Graham Spanier and Vice Provost for Educational Equity Terrell Jones met with black students on Friday to address student safety and the larger problem of racism on campus.

Penn State police are still investigating the letters with the help of the FBI, the state attorney general and the U.S. Postal Service. "If we can discover the origin, we can probably discover the perpetrator or perpetrators," Neff said.

The letters came in envelopes postmarked from Altoona. Altoona contains a distribution center that sorts mail for a large area of central Pennsylvania, including State College. The letters are unsigned and it's unclear whether they're the work of an individual or a group.

Someone caught sending a racist message could face criminal charges, Neff said, including harassment and ethnic intimidation.

[Thursday, Oct. 19, 2000]

Students, officials speak against hate mailings

By Daryl Lang
Collegian Staff Writer

Angered by the hate-filled messages sent out last week, hundreds of students packed the ground floor of the HUB-Robeson Center yesterday to stand against racism.

Penn State Black Caucus president LaKeisha Wolf, one of four people specifically targeted by the threatening mail, shared a podium with former Black Caucus president Joseph Dawkins. Wolf and Dawkins both answered questions from the crowd, which included many Black Caucus members.

"This is not just my problem," Wolf said. "This is not just a black problem. This is everybody's problem."

The event was billed as a press conference but attracted far more student supporters than it did reporters. Several university administrators were in the audience, but Penn State President Graham Spanier was absent.

Spanier and other university officials met with some students Friday to talk about the mailings and the overall racial problems on campus.

Four people — Wolf, Don Edmond (senior-history), a third student and a Penn State trustee — received unsigned racist threats in the mail last week.

Wolf received two letters; the envelope containing her second letter also included a note for Edmond.

Wolf and some other students visited Edmond at 1:30 a.m. Friday morning to tell him about the letter.

"It was a pretty rough going that night studying," Edmond said yesterday.

Edmond and Wolf both may have been singled out because of their recent letters and columns in The Daily Collegian.

Despite this, Edmond said it's a positive step when people speak up about racism.

"I think more students have to do what I did," he said. "I wrote a letter to the editor. I spoke out."

Wolf said the university has responded appropriately in addressing her safety. Both her letters contained physical threats laced with racial slurs and profanity.

The second letter to Wolf stated: "Thanks to your picture in the paper, now we know what you look like."

Wolf and Dawkins both said the letters aren't isolated incidents, but reflect a persistent climate of racism on campus.

"We find ourselves in an environment today — we're supposed to be in a progressive, educational, enlightened environment — where a young woman can have her life threatened, her life in mortal danger, for no other reason than the color of her skin," Dawkins said.

Students at the press conference said they hoped the emotions there would carry over to the rest of the campus.

"Right now, I'm outraged but at the same time I'm happy to see so many people together," said Mikaela Marmion (senior-letters, arts and sciences).

Like several other students at the event, Marmion said she would have preferred to see a more diverse mix of races in the crowd.

"I think that, first of all, white students need to recognize that this is a problem," Marmion said. "People need to recognize that people aren't making this stuff up and looking for things to complain about."

Other students wondered if the person responsible for sending the messages was lurking somewhere nearby.

"It's scary that you don't know who this person is," said Nicole Coleman (junior-management sciences and information systems).

Authorities are still trying to figure out who is responsible for the letters. There were no new developments yesterday, but the case remained under investigation, according to Penn State Police Services.

Meanwhile, the Black Caucus has scheduled a meeting next Thursday to address the problems. The meeting starts at 7 p.m. in the Pollock Rec Room and will include a forum on racism at 8:30.

Students yesterday said it was important to continue a dialogue on racial issues.

"If anything racially motivated happens to you, come and tell Black Caucus. Come and tell administrators," Wolf told the crowd. "Don't keep it to yourself, because if you don't say anything, you're going to fall for it. These things will continue to happen unless we address them."

[Monday, Oct. 23, 2000]

Marchers lead silent rally against racial intolerance

By Sarah Ziegenfuss
For the Collegian

Dressed in black, carrying signs and holding hands, a procession of almost 300 students marched silently from the HUB-Robeson Center to Beaver Stadium Saturday to protest the recent outbreaks of racism at Penn State.

The purpose of the march was not just to protest, but also to promote unity among Penn State students, increase awareness of the race problem at Penn State and show support to the black students on campus who were targeted by hate mail.

"We want to stress the severity and significance of these issues," said Joe Dawkins, former Black Caucus president and one of the organizers of the march.

The procession of silent, black-clad students was a stark contrast to the crowds of noisy fans dressed in blue and white pouring into the stadium.

"I think they're really getting your attention by just marching in silence and all dressed in black," said Sara Kim (junior-business administration), who watched the march.

Football fans all along the march's route turned to stare at the marchers and their signs, which had messages such as "Racism is a Disease, Be Part of the Cure" and "Black and White, We Must Unite" written on them.

A few members of the crowd clapped to show their support as the marchers went by. "If I wasn't out here with College Democrats, I'd be marching with them," said Ali Altman (senior-political science).

The marchers formed a circle outside the gates of the stadium, which seemed to annoy some students who were entering the gates. "I think it's the wrong place to do it," said David Durnick (senior-biochemistry and molecular biology) while going into the stadium.

Outside the gates, Dawkins gave a passionate speech about racism, telling the crowd that he believed "what we're here for is right." Raising his voice against the sounds of the Penn State Blue Band, Dawkins said, "You cannot solve a problem until you stop denying that the problem exists." After the speech, Kenneth Clarke, director of the Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs, led a prayer.

[Monday, April 23, 2001]

Letter sent to student threatens death, harm

By Alex Weininger
Collegian Staff Writer

A black Penn State student leader received a typed death threat Friday afternoon that not only threatened the black community at Penn State, but also claimed that a young black man had been killed and his body left in a wooded area in Centre County.

Daily Collegian reporter Daryl Lang received an envelope Friday that contained two threatening letters.

The first letter was addressed to Lang and included derogatory comments about him and the targeted black Penn State student leader. The author of the letter asked Lang to deliver the second threat to the black student leader.

Police are not publicizing the student leader's name for her protection.

The second letter said that "this is a white academy (Penn State) in a white town — in a white country and by god it's going to stay that way." The person or persons who composed the letter said they see the student leader two or three times a day and plan to attack her, but have not done so yet because they said there were "cameras everywhere on campus."

The writer added that "I will pick my spot . . . those like you have been run off or killed, you, also will just disappear and never be found."

The letter also said the writer or writers "mean business" and told the recipient of the letter to have police check a wooded area in Centre County for a young black man who was killed. The letter said no one noticed the man's disappearance.

Resident Assistants checked their dorms yesterday for any students who may be missing. Penn State Police Services have not received any reports of missing students, a police spokesman said yesterday.

At the bottom of the typed portion of the letter to the student leader, the words "Grad Day = bombs-PSU" were handwritten.

Penn State officials would not say Saturday how commencement ceremonies could be affected because of the threat.

The Penn State Black Caucus held a press conference Friday night to warn the student body about the threats. The group began the conference with a prayer for the safety of students on campus.

"We ask God to give us the strength to go through this again . . . no fear, no fear, cause our God's not a God of fear," said one of the women as the group of students held hands before speaking to the press.

Vice President of Black Caucus Sharleen Morris described the content of the letters and said the conference was held to warn the entire Penn State community, especially the black students of Penn State and the Commonwealth Campuses "of the imminent threats on their lives."

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Black Caucus Vice President-elect Takkeem Morgan asked students to take safety precautions by traveling in groups and staying alert.

"We're stressing the safety of students at Penn State . . . and we don't know what this person is capable of doing," Morgan said.

Outgoing Commonwealth Campus Student Government President Gabriel Bryant said Black Caucus was disappointed that Penn State President Graham Spanier was absent from the press conference.

Spanier, who had an engagement in Harrisburg Friday evening, arrived as Bryant was speaking.

Spanier said he was briefed on the situation while in Harrisburg and said he got back as quickly as he could to discuss the threats with student leaders, Penn State administration and law enforcement officials, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"I'm very disturbed by what's happened here and it's deeply troubling to me personally. I've been in touch throughout the evening and got back as quickly as I could," Spanier said.

About two hours after Lang received the letter, Penn State administrators and law enforcement officials met with Lang and the other threatened student.

Other racist e-mails and letters received in the past year were also discussed at the meeting.

Penn State Police Services supervisor John Torres said police are continuing to search certain areas within the county for the body mentioned in the letter. Torres would not comment on how much longer the police intend to search, however he said they have found no evidence of a body at this point. Penn State police said they are also continuing to investigate into whether there are any black Penn State students missing.

Both targeted students were offered round-the-clock police protection, while Lang said the focus should remain on the student leader.

"She was quite upset but handled it very strongly; my heart goes out to her. No one should have to go through this," Lang said.

The final item discussed in the meeting was how the threat would be communicated to the Penn State student body.

Lang said that in the meeting, Vice President of Student Affairs Bill Asbury discussed sending an e-mail message to students concerning the letters. The e-mail sent by Asbury arrived Saturday morning and contained quotes from Spanier, condemning the recently received death threat and the racism that has occurred throughout the year at Penn State. It also urged anyone who may be aware of any black male that has not been seen recently to contact Penn State police at 863-1111.

A reward of \$10,000 is being offered for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person who sent the threat. Penn State announced its \$5,000 reward Friday, and the Penn State Alumni Association matched the reward over the weekend. If anyone has information regarding the letters, Penn State police urges them to contact police.

Other incidents of racism have occurred within the Penn State community during the past two weeks. On April 13, a black student reported that someone had etched a swastika and the word "Nazi" into the door of her off-campus apartment. Earlier the same day a woman told police two male students yelled racial slurs at a group of students outside of Brumbaugh Hall in East Halls.

Residence Life had a meeting Monday evening in response to reports that someone in the Pollock Halls dorm yelled ethnic slurs at a group of students on April 12.

That same day a team of black state legislators and Penn State students, faculty and administrators met to discuss racism at the university. Students and faculty told legislators they were concerned about what they see as the university's slow response to racial problems on campus.

The threat sent to the black student leader mentioned the meeting between Penn State and the legislators, saying that the politicians cannot remedy racism at the university.

[Monday, April 23, 2001]

Racist mail spurs demonstration Police arrested 26 protesters at the start of the Blue-White game.

By Adam Gorney,
Gwenn Miller
and Alex Weininger
Collegian Staff Writers

Twenty-six people protesting the university's response to recent racist death threats were arrested Saturday afternoon in Beaver Stadium at the start of the Blue-White game.

Criminal complaints will be filed against the protesters, who will be charged with criminal trespass, according to the Penn State Department of Public Information. The charges have yet to be filed and the protesters were released, but a Penn State Police Services spokesman said the protesters will receive summons by mail.

The students ran to the 50-yard line at the end of the national anthem, locked arms and huddled on the ground. Police removed the students, dragging some and escorting others who walked off of the field. A group of about 30 gathered in support of the students as they were being led to the police vans. The supporters chanted and raised their fists in support as each student was taken from the stadium police barracks.

The group was protesting the university's response to death threats that have been mailed to black leaders, athletes and athletes' parents since October. They said they were aiming to inform the Penn State community about the death threats, something some protesters believe the university has failed to do successfully.

"This is a protest against death threats and the university's cover-up of them," Assata Richards (graduate-sociology) said. "The FBI has been on this case for over a year. The university is not doing anything."

Richards said Penn State President Graham Spanier has refused to take initiative on the matter.

Although the university released a statement on his behalf Friday, Spanier was unavailable for comment Saturday. He left at the beginning of the game for an appointment in Washington, D.C. He is expected to return tomorrow morning.

Black Caucus leaders said in a press conference held Saturday evening that not enough has been done by the university to make these threats visible to Penn State students.

"Without this demonstration today, all students would be blind to the fact that students' lives are in imminent danger," Black Caucus Vice President Sharleen Morris said.

Caucus leaders said information regarding incidents of racist mail received by members of the Penn State community, including football players, board of trustee members and athletes' parents, have been withheld from them until recently when the caucus confronted administrators.

"It speaks to the severity of the situation when various members are also being threatened," said Chenits Pettigrew (senior-media studies). "It's important for people to know that these aren't isolated incidents." Caucus leaders also expressed their concern over the lack of university protocol for these situations.

Former Black Caucus President Joseph Dawkins said there should be a set way to handle these situations and that currently there isn't one person or group of people that targeted students can turn to.

"We're not demanding the university to go out of its way to appease us, we're just asking it to do what it's mandated to do . . . to create a welcoming campus climate," Dawkins said.

After the conference, Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon said Penn State has brought in several law enforcement agencies and Penn State administrators are continuing to seek out methods to handle the racism issue at Penn State.

"There is not a day that goes by that people aren't looking into the issues that the world faces and that are in the microcosm at Penn State," Mahon said.

Penn State spokesman Steve MacCarthy said the university is trying to promote an attitude of unity and cooperation. Penn State has planned a unity march to start at 4 p.m. tomorrow in front of Old Main.

Dawkins, however, said the march was insulting and said Black Caucus had not been consulted on the university's efforts against racism, which includes the unity march.

"The university only seems to come up with feel-good ideas," Dawkins said.

As Black Caucus leaders continued to discuss their demands of the university to become more proactive when racism occurs, Undergraduate Student Government President Justin Zartman provided his support to the caucus and the "first amendment actions by University Park students," referring to the protesters' demonstration in Beaver Stadium Saturday.

Council of Commonwealth Student Government President Kris Ankarlo said CCSG also supports Black Caucus.

"Their actions have brought these issues of intolerance and hate towards Penn State students to the forefront of the public consciousness . . . and should be commended for their courage," Ankarlo said.

The protest was planned after a threatening letter was sent Friday to a Daily Collegian reporter requesting that he deliver it to a black student leader. In the letter, death threats were made. It also said a black man had been killed in the past week and buried near a wooded area.

"What does it take for people to take this seriously. We pay for our education, and we come here to get this?" Dawkins said.