FEAT URES

Racial Tensions on Campus Discussed with Campus Student Leaders

Bulletin reporter Juliayn Coleman interviewed representatives from four campus groups: the Black Students Organization (BSO), the Barnard Organization of Black Women (BOBW), the Lesbian Bisexual Gay Coalition (LBGC), and the Jewish Students Union (JSU) to get to the heart of issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia on campus. Coleman asked all groups representatives the same questions to be as objective as possible.

Andy Engel (CC’92), Member, LBGC

Coleman: What are your group’s most immediate goals, and how are those goals being met by your group?

Engel: LBGC’s immediate goals are to provide social and cultural activities for the lesbian, bisexual, and gay community at Columbia and the metropolitan community and provide for the lesbian, bisexual, gay, and straight community with the focus more on lesbians, bisexuals, and gays. When needed, we respond politically. Two examples of that were the cosponsored rally against hatred when Leonard Jeffries spoke. LBGC cosponsored the rally with the Jewish Student Union. Another recent political action was the candlelight vigil and march that took place after a visitor, a man, was raped in the basement of Plimpton.

Coleman: What is your group’s relationship to the rest of campus?

Engel: I have a feeling that there are many members of the gay community, closeted and out, who don’t actively involve themselves with LBGC. There are several reasons for this. One could be that Columbia College in itself, or Columbia University in itself, isn’t really a campus-oriented university like other colleges around the country. There are more distractions here. I think there’s a significant population who come to Columbia to get involved in the city. Their involvement in the campus is secondary, extracurricularly. I think that’s one contributing factor. I think another might be that LBGC is perceived by some as cliquish and unwelcoming and that’s been something we’ve been trying to work on, work on getting rid of. I’m not sure how straight people perceive LBGC. I know a lot of straight people come to our dances on the first Friday of every month; the dances are popular. I really don’t know. It’s strange how I’m dividing into— I guess it makes some sense how I’m dividing this into gay people and straight people.

Coleman: What is the status of your group’s relationship to the other groups I mentioned—BSO, BOBW, and JSU?

Engel: Let’s take the Jewish Student Union. Last semester in the spring I had tried to organize a Jewish lesbian bisexual gay cocktail party. It was supposed to be cosponsored by LBGC and the JSU. I am a member of both organizations. I thought it be appropriate that both groups have their name on the flyer. The person who organized the event with— both of us wanted to put the word ‘pride’ on the flyer. It said “Celebrate you Jewish lesbian bisexual gay pride.” It was brought before the board of the JSU, and they claimed the statement was too “political.” They would like to cosponsor it if we would take off the word ‘pride’. After much frustration my friend and I decided we would not accept the JSU’s cosponsorship. This semester, things turned around a bit, and I think I know why. I’ll explain that later. The JSU and LBGC cosponsored this rally against hatred the night Jeffries spoke. And that was quite a turnaround from our last attempted cosponsored event. And I think the reason why it was successful was because we really didn’t have to direct our issues against each other. We could take our issues and direct them on a third party: this issue of racism and sexism and homophobia. When the JSU and LBGC had to deal with their own issues against each other, it was uncomfortable for the Jewish Student Union. I forgot to mention this beforehand, but another reason is why the JSU didn’t want to cosponsor the cocktail party was because they felt it would offend certain members of our community,” meaning the orthodox Jewish community. But what they failed to realize was that they were offending another significant part of their community: us, the Jewish lesbians, bisexuals, and gay/s that exist on campus. I can’t talk about BOBW because we have no contact with them. We haven’t had any kind of programming with BOBW. But BSO—before this whole Jeffries thing took place, before we even knew Jeffries was coming to campus, Gary Johnson, who is a graduate student at SIPA, a gay black man himself, was the organizer for the race relations—human rights awareness week. That took place the week that Jeffries spoke. He had asked the BSO and LBGC to cosponsor a video presentation by a black lesbian and a white lesbian. We would just have to pay for the location for the speakers and BSO was supposed to pay for the food; there was a reception. We had agreed to do this, we were really excited, this was the first time BSO was ever going to do an event with LBGC. Then the news broke that BSO had invited Jeffries to speak. The news also broke that we were on the same program with BSO. Jeffries’s speech was part of the human rights awareness week. When I first heard the news I was ready to say, “Look, there’s no way in hell we’re going to cosponsor this event with BSO, this video presentation, after hearing about Jeffries thing.” But members of LBGC calmly tried to make me think more rationally and we decided to keep our commitment and to do the video presentation with BSO. I had drafted this nasty letter to BSO. Very condescending on purpose, telling them that we were—that LBGC was famous that they had invited Jeffries to speak, that he’s such a homophobic speaker who’s made such homophobic comments and such anti-Semitic comments. We were very upset, and in the letter I said, “We do hope members of BSO come to the video presentation by this black lesbian and this white lesbian because we feel you need to be educated about certain members of your community that you might be alienating,” specifically black lesbians, bisexuals, and gays.” So what?