

# Excalibur

York University's Community Newspaper

## Abortion debate banned

Written by David Ros, Staff Writer

Wednesday, 5 March 2008

### *Procedure likened to genocide*

A planned debate on abortion rights at York University's Student Centre was cancelled less than three hours before it was scheduled to begin.

At an emergency meeting on Feb. 28, members of the Student Centre Board of Directors, which included some members of the York Federation of Students (YFS), voted unanimously to cancel the debate that was to be held later that day.

The debate, entitled Abortion Debate: A Woman's Right or a Moral Wrong, was jointly organized by the Students for Bioethical Awareness (SBA) and the York Debating Society (YDS). It would have pitted Jose Ruba from the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (CCBR) arguing for pro-life against Michael Payton of the Freethinkers, Skeptics and Athiests at York (FSAY) arguing for pro-choice.

Student Centre vice-chair Kelly Holloway said the debate was cancelled because it was an equal rights issue.

"The reason is that it's an equity concern for the Student Centre. Having a debate over whether or not women should be able to choose what to do with their own bodies is tantamount to having a debate about whether or not a man should be able to beat his wife," Holloway said.

"The issue is violence against women, and women in this country have a right to choose what they do with their bodies. They have a right to have an abortion, and we don't want to validate a debate that wants to threaten that right."

Holloway said the cancellation was voted for by all members of the Student Centre Board of Directors, which includes: chair Hamid Osman, who was just re-elected as YFS president; treasurer Gilary Massa, who is the current YFS vice-president equity and was recently elected as vice-president external; Fuad Abdi, current YFS vice-president operations; and Mahamed Hassan, Student Centre director-at-large.

SBA co-president Margaret Fung said the cancellation of the debate was a clear violation of freedom of speech.

"Personally, I'm just confused about what freedom of speech is. What is this limit that they speak of? Is it subjective? Is it according to their viewpoints?" Fung said.

"It's the consistency that I am questioning, like certain issues, like the McMaster protest. [The YFS] is for freedom of speech and then for issues such as abortion they say it is not debatable. They are not for freedom of speech."

Fung said she and YDS president Amir Mohareb met with Abdi and YFS executive

director Jeremy Salter in order to discuss why the debate had been cancelled. Fung alleged that during the course of that meeting, Salter, who holds no position of office in the Student Centre, compared pro-lifers to the Ku Klux Klan.

When asked about this, Salter declined comment.

Fung also alleged that by sitting on the Student Centre's Board of Directors, the YFS members were essentially involved in a conflict of interest.

"This is a regular conflict of interest in corporations today, whether you're sitting on the board and then you're on management, so this is very common," she said.

"What's important to me is that the students are aware. We are part of the YFS; we're part of this union. The YFS really has a lot of power in terms of allowing students to be exposed to certain things and based on the interest that we were getting from this debate, it shows that students were getting very interested. They're really interested in this topic and inhibiting them from finding more information about this is really disappointing."

Ruba and Payton also agreed that the cancellation of the debate was in violation of both groups' right to freedom of speech.

"It's so essential that universities allow free speech, even free speech that some people might consider hate speech, because I don't believe this is hate speech obviously, but free speech means giving ideas out, explaining them, getting them attacked and getting them debated. I mean, that's what universities are for," Ruba said.

Payton said that in the context of freedom of speech, it is important that all sides of an issue must be given the opportunity to state their case.

"If you don't believe in free speech for views that you hate, views that are offensive to you, then you don't believe in free speech."

When asked to comment, Massa said she would send an email outlining the YFS' position. As of print time, the email had not been received.

One of the reasons Holloway gave for the cancellation of the debate was the controversial nature of the CCBR's presentation, which involved a series of graphic images depicting aborted fetuses and equated abortion to genocide.

"They say abortion is a genocide. That is the organization that this student group was bringing to campus and that is unacceptable in the Student Centre," Holloway said.

"I would not welcome anyone into my student space that wants to threaten a woman's right to do what she wants with her own body."

Holloway said the CCBR's message was harmful even within the context of a debate.

"Debates don't exist in a vacuum, so there is a context to every debate. The context to this debate is that a particular organization wants to take this right away from women. That is their objective [and] that's why they wanted to have a so-called debate," she said.

When questioned about whether she would be okay with a student group debating on behalf of the pro-life side, Holloway declined to comment, stating she was only willing to talk about the specific situation of the debate being cancelled.

Payton said he had no problem debating Ruba on the issues, but said he made Ruba agree to let people know that he was going to show graphic images to allow anyone who did not wish to see them to leave the room. He also maintained that Holloway actually hurt the pro-choice side by cancelling the debate.

"I really think that the people who were harmed in this were both the pro-life and the pro-choice side. I think that unwittingly [Holloway] has hurt the pro-choice side because now she has made these people into martyrs for their cause. Already there are pro-life

newspapers that are calling against York University because of what she did,” Payton said.

On March 4, five days later, the YDS held a public debate on the topic of hate speech and the role of the university in policing free speech on campus. The debate was held in a room in Accolade East, where speakers referenced the cancelled abortion debate several times, as well as recent incidents of hate speech on campus.

“We [the YDS] feel that contentious issues should be brought forward and should be discussed and we feel that we’re well-suited to have the capabilities to moderate and to create the type of environment where they can be,” said former YDS president and current president of the Osgoode Debate Society, Rudi Lof, who moderated the debate. “And what we hope is that the way we pulled off tonight’s event is showing that even though, clearly, the club has issues with this sort of ad hoc policies [...], we still feel that there is a valid reason for their positions and valid reasons to have more control over the types of activities and information that’s distributed on campus, and we’re more than happy to have people have a free and fair discussion about where we should draw the line.”

Although posters for the event advertised that Massa was scheduled to attend as a speaker, she was not present.

“I’m sure whatever reason it was [for the absence], it was important,” he said.

“We were hoping someone [from the YFS] would come out, not to discuss what happened on Thursday, but to discuss the effects of hate speech on campus.”

*-With files from Zalina Alvi.*

COPYRIGHT © EXCALIBUR 2007. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED