



YORK UNIVERSITY

Student defends stifling abortion debate

Freedom of speech backlash after executive bars pro-life group

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STAFF REPORTER

Kelly Holloway did not mean to spark a debate on freedom of expression when she helped stifle an abortion debate on campus.

"I actually don't think this is very controversial," the graduate student at York University said of the decision to cancel a Feb. 28 event that would have shown graphic images of abortion and asked participants whether the procedure should be criminalized.

"Most people understand that every woman has the right to choose what she does with her own body and that moral considerations about abortion are a very personal matter for individuals to decide," said Holloway, who helped make the decision as vice-chair of the student centre where the debate was scheduled to be held.

"The legal precedent in Canada is that abortion and those women who choose to have the medical procedure will not be criminalized," said Holloway, who is also president of the York University Graduate Students' Association. "So every York student has the right to make up their own mind and there is no need for an event, organized by anti-choice campaigners, that is disguised as a debate."

Holloway said banning discussions of the pros and cons of abortion was never the point.

Her beef was with inviting the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform, (CCBR) a Calgary-based pro-life group that compares abortion to genocide and pushes to make it illegal.

Holloway remembers the display the group brought to University of Toronto a few years ago when she was an undergraduate bioethics student there and active in the student union.

"They erected huge signs in full colour of fabricated fetuses alongside people dying in the Holocaust and also pictures of people being lynched," she said. "So we set up a table outside of that display as the student union to encourage students to tell us what their reactions were so we could understand the effect it was having on students. We collected hundreds of statements from students who said they were upset, they were appalled, they were traumatized and they were worried about the fact that the student union hadn't taken responsibility to actually interfere in the matter."

She was not about to let that happen again.

When the student centre executive learned about the event – billed as a debate on abortion rights between Jose Ruba from CCBR and Michael Payton from a student group called Freethinkers, Skeptics and Atheists at York – they held an emergency meeting and voted unanimously to cancel it.

She said the executive supports Charter-protected freedom of expression, but felt it had a responsibility to protect students from speech it viewed as discrimination or harassment on its student-funded space. "Just like we would not sanction the use of student space to challenge whether black students should be able to attend university, or whether homosexuality should be illegal, we would not sanction this particular debate over whether or not women should be able to have a choice concerning their own bodies."

CCBR executive director Stephanie Gray said her organization views its mission as educational rather than political but that the extension of its beliefs sees it advocating for a change in law.

Holloway said the executive would probably come to the same decision if it were a student group taking part instead of CCBR.

It might not have had to end this way.

Dafne Gokcen of the University of Waterloo Debating Society said she moderated an on-campus debate featuring CCBR on Feb. 27 – including a graphic video CCBR insists on showing at such events – with minimal publicity and outrage.

"People were able to sit and listen to the debate and listen to both sides without getting too emotionally involved and without attacking people," she said, adding that she doubts anyone changed their mind on the issue but they learned much about the other side.