

Letter of concern

Editor's note: The following is a letter to Guy Savard, Chair of the St. F. X. University Board of Governors with copies to Dr. Sean Riley, President, St. Francis Xavier University; Ramsay Duff, Secretary-Treasurer, Board of Governors; and the Casket. While the Casket is providing coverage of the contents of the letter with comments from the parties involved, an editorial decision to print a portion of the letter was made in order to bring the matter to the attention of the community.

Dear Mr. Savard:

We write you about an issue we believe should become a priority for the Board of Governors at St. F. X. As the Chair of what is held out to be the Canada's Premier Undergraduate Experience, we would like to bring to your attention activities and events leading up to and surrounding the recent Bur-Mac hockey game that are of concern to the community. As well we draw to your attention a broader student culture that demeans both female and male students and creates a climate of tolerance for acts of sexual violence and homophobia.

Although St. F. X. has prohibited the playing of the annual Bur-Mac hockey game on campus, it continues to be played at the local Antigonish Arena. While this letter focuses on behaviours associated with that game, it is not our intention to suggest that strong inter-house rivalries and games such as this should be discontinued. Indeed, healthy rivalries are to be encouraged. Rather, it is the behaviour that is exposed by this game which must be your concern.

It has apparently become the practice for students from each of the Burke and MacIsaac houses to dress in house colours and costumes of various description, which unfortunately includes many t-shirts and signage with slogans that can only be described as promoting attitudes which are sexist, degrading, and utterly disrespectful of fellow students, both male and female. By virtue of the internet, subsequent to the game these slogans and pictures have become widely available for viewing. Copies of some are attached. They are available for the world to see as an example of what St. F. X. Campus life has to offer prospective students.

The slogans and messages are directed at residents of the opposing house, are highly sexualized and include threats of and references to sexual violence. For example, one young woman is wearing a t-shirt proclaiming, "All the roofies in the world couldn't get me home with a Burke guy". This is of particular concern, as it would seem to suggest that "roofies", slang for Rohypnol, a rape facilitation drug, might have an acceptable use if not "with a Burke guy." There are pictorial representations as well, including a pseudo warning sign on a shirt cautioning members of the other house to be careful or they may be forcibly sodomized.

The attitudes that underscore the chants, signs and t-shirts that students so proudly displayed at the game are very dangerous: they promote the utter objectification of women, and the use of sex as a tool of power over others. Yet, these behaviours have been "normalized"; students believe this is okay and acceptable. To depersonalize the sexual relationship to such an extent, and to use it as a tool of force, is to ensure that not only will women be at greater risk of sexual assault, but that the response to such an occurrence from fellow students will be muted and dismissive. It is a recipe for disaster.

But these attitudes are not only disrespectful of women: they are offensive to men. This behaviour promotes the idea that men are not creatures of intelligence or creative thought, but rather are animals whose only thought is sexual, and whose dominance depends on their physical displays of sexual power....

...While the University has responded to a letter of concern from the Antigonish Womens' Resource Centre by saying it does not condone the Bur-Mac event and points out it is held off campus, that response misses what should be a painfully obvious point — the culture that has created these attitudes is on your campus. These types of behaviours would not be tolerated in the students' homes or high schools: they learn this when they come to St. F.X.

It is time for a change. It is time when the culture that students learn on campus should not be how to degrade and depersonalize, but rather how to build respect for one's fellow student and to mature as an individual. Life at X should allow for growth as a human, not regression.

We ask for the opportunity before the end of the school year to sit with the leaders at X to discuss the issues identified in this letter and to help find the solution to this problem that has plagued St. F. X. for too long.

We look forward to hearing from you. Please address your response to Lucille Harper, Executive Director, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, 204 Kirk Place, 219 Main Street, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, B2G 2C1.

Sincerely,

Dr. Margot Sadler, physician; Dr. Maureen Allen, Director of Emergency Department, St. Martha's Regional Hospital; Dr. Chris Tragakis, psychologist; Liz Chisholm, Chair, Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women; Debbie Cotton, Coordinator, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program; Rev. Dawn Dickieson, Anglican Church of Canada; Lyndsay Anderson, Residence Life Manager; Tammy Lee Vautour, Executive Director, Naomi Society for Victims of Family Violence; Bob Whitman, Co-Director, New Leaf Program, men's intervention program; Ron Kelly, Co-Director, New Leaf Program, men's intervention program; Lucille Harper, Executive Director, AWRC; Nelda Armour, therapist; Carole Taylor, community member