

The Caribou House Incident

Sexual Harassment of UBC Women

By Lynda Hookham and Nicole Merriam

Twenty to thirty male students living in University of British Columbia housing wrote party invitations that were sexist and threatened violence to 300 women on campus. Students polarized around the issue. R.C.M.P. and the Resident Standards Committee investigated. A complaint was filed to the Sexual Harassment Policy Committee. Two of the men were evicted from the university residence. The university and students are considering ways to re-educate themselves and future students.

On the evening of 10 October 1990 twenty to thirty UBC students living in the all-male Caribou House, gathered together in the basement of the house to write invitations to the women living in Place Vanier residence. The next evening the men were to hold an annual tug-of-war between themselves and Sherwood Lett, another house in Vanier. The tug-of-war was to be followed by a "social," an evening of dancing and drinking.

Come to the tug-of-war — we'll fuck the shit out of you.

As the night of invitation-writing progressed, a competition started to see who could write the "best" invitations. At 4 a.m., approximately ten of the men obtained the keys to the women's and co-ed houses in Vanier from their House Advisor and delivered the hand-written invitations to about three hundred women. These women woke that morning to find the invitations had been slid under their doors.

You're a fat cow, but I'll fuck you anyways.

One of the women's houses did not get individual invitations — they received a poster of a woman on her hands and knees, a bag over her head and a dog in a sexually explicit position on top of her.

One woman, who used a wheelchair for mobility, also found a note under her door. It referred to her as a "mutant."

Two women, both advisors, received personalized notes. One, in the recent past, had berated some of the men for making noise during "quiet hours".

What's the best thing about fucking an advisor? Killing her afterwards and giving her 2 points for screaming.

Another woman who had been sexually assaulted several years earlier, also received an invitation.

Bananas? Peel it, feel it, squeal, pig.

As the morning of October 11 wore on, women from each house gathered all the notes from those who had not torn them up and took them to the Resident Life Co-ordinator. He informed the R.C.M.P. and also filed a complaint to the Place Vanier Standards Committee. The Committee, composed of students who live in Place Vanier, assigns points to residents who do not abide by residence standards. An accumulation of four points is cause for eviction from residence.

We'll crush your cervix to oblivion.

On October 14, the department of U.B.C. Sexual Harassment Policy Committee and the U.B.C. Housing Director held a meeting for those women who had received the notes; approximately 50 attended.

Responses to the notes varied considerably amongst these women. Some believed it was a joke and should be taken as such. Some thought measures should be

taken, but were unsure what these should be. Others thought that the men responsible should be evicted from residence and others, that they should be expelled from the university.

We'll suck your nipples bloody.

The R.C.M.P. investigated.

All of the men involved sent flowers with an apology to the two advisors who had received personalized notes. Concerned men of Caribou House and a few of the men involved went to each of the residences and apologized to the women.

If you're tired of pulling on your tampon string, come to the tug-of-war.

A complaint was filed to the Sexual Harassment Policy Committee by three women who had received notes and two concerned men, both advisors in Robson, one of the all-male houses. The complaint requested mediation between themselves and the men involved. The complaint was motivated by a need to understand why and how events had evolved on the night of October 10. The complainants needed the men responsible to know and understand how the incident had impacted on them emotionally; how it had affected their lives and the lives of their partners, friends and families.

These five could not convince anyone else to sign the complaint.

Life sucks, but so do you.

Two women advisors who had received personalized notes were asked to sign the complaint. At first they seemed willing. However, within a few days they indicated they had talked to their supervisor, the Resident Life Co-ordinator, and had decided that it would not be appropriate for them to sign.

Bite, suck, fight, fuck, nibble, gobble, chew. We're the fuckin Lettes, who the fuck are you?

Initially, media coverage, overwhelmingly pro-feminist and directed against the letter writers, was enormous. As public attention grew, the students of the university became polarized around the issue. Protective walls were built around the letter writers.

One person from Caribou House, the house president, became a spokesperson for the house. The letter writers were inaccessible to the public. Their names were protected. Contact with any media outlet which "sensationalized" the incident was cut off. The exact content of all the letters was never released.

You're a Whore.

Many students worried that the men would receive punishment that was too severe for the crime. There was no sexual or physical attack, only verbal, they argued. It was just a "prank," "in poor taste," "demonstrating poor judgment."

The invitations were "just rude." They didn't "mean to insult us (women). They did it to disgust themselves, not to disgust us."

"They just didn't think." It happened because there were "too many men in one room" and, "you know, boys will be boys." "They're just boys, they don't know better."

"They've paid enough". "It's kind of gutless acting against some relatively defenseless men, it's very easy to dump on some first year guys."

"The guys need some thorough re-education, but not some jail term, trial by peers or eviction from the university."

What's the best thing about fucking a 12-year-old? Killing her afterward.

Many worried that the guilty men may have their chances for restricted faculty admission (i.e., law and medicine) reduced.

One student, in an attempt to put the incident in context, stated that it had happened in an environment that promoted a "happy breeding ground for boisterous sexuality."

S.L. fucked your mother, Robson fucked your dog, now we'll fuck you.

A demonstration on campus was led by a group called Women Against Misogyny. The demonstrators, carrying torches and beating drums, stood outside of Caribou House and shouted "Shame, shame." There they were met by 500 students who told them to go home. Other students put stereo speakers in their windows and turned the volume up. Many students felt



that humiliating these men would only reinforce their opinions of women.

A female student initiated a petition stating: "The media have distorted and manipulated the facts concerning the events at Caribou House, Place Vanier, in a manner which has promoted hostility and antagonism between the residents of Vanier and the general public. This issue should remain an internal issue to be dealt with according to the residence standards."

All of the men involved met with the President of the University.

You're not good enough for me to fuck, but you can fuck my dog.

The dates for mediation were booked by the Sexual Harassment Policy Committee and the Resident Life Co-ordinator for a time during mid-term examinations. However, complainants were not informed of the date until the morning of the mediation. Because no advance warning had been given and exams were in progress, only four of the original complainants were able to attend the first night of mediation.

Attendance at the mediation was mandatory for all the men involved in the invitation-writing.

Because there were eighteen men and only five complainants, four mediation groups were held over two evenings; the complainants were broken into two groups, each facing one group of men per night. Mediators included two sexual harassment officers from the university, one off-campus sexual harassment officer and a psychiatrist. The Dean of Sciences and U.B.C. Housing Director attended one group on the second night.

Initially the men were defensive and angry and would not listen to the complainants, blaming the women for the position they were in. As the mediation progressed, they began to listen and it appeared that most of the men began to understand the impact of their actions. Generally, constructive dialogue took place.

The Place Vanier Standards Commit-

tee assigned two men with four points, evicting both of them. (One of these two did not attend the mediation.) Other men involved also received points, but none sufficient to evict them.

No charges were laid by the R.C.M.P.

Seventeen of the men received a suspension from further studies at the University of British Columbia for a time period of four to seventeen months, depending on their personal involvement.

Traditionally, universities are viewed as institutions in which social change is initiated. In light of the increasing focus on women's issues in our society today, it is inconceivable to many of us that events such as the Caribou Incident would take place in a university setting. Yet, the ideologies of misogyny, sexual harassment and violence against women still remain embedded in the social and intellectual fabric of these institutions.

It is encouraging that these sexist ideologies are being confronted by many students and faculty on campus. However, much work needs to be done.

The University of British Columbia is considering imposing further educational experiences on the men involved in the Caribou House Incident. These may include involvement in women's crisis centers, group education and speaking engagements. None of these would be appropriate without a "letting go" of old sexist ideologies by the men involved.

The residents of Place Vanier, together with U.B.C. and the Sexual Harassment Policy Committee, are currently considering ways to re-educate themselves and future students in the changing relationships between women and men. Methods currently under consideration include obligatory Women's Studies classes and group dialogue in residences. These writers believe that these strategies should be accompanied by similar ones directed at university faculty and staff.

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