

The Aftermath of NC Central Student's Account

Contributed by Aaron Saunders – Black College Wire
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Some faculty condemn release of Martin's story, but others stand by it

When Lisa Carl gave her English composition students at North Carolina Central University the option of writing either a first-person autobiographical account of a significant event in their lives or an analysis of a graphic novel or anthropological classic, every student selected the first-person option.

"This may sound like a piece of cake, but you may find that it's the hardest assignment of all," writes Carl on the assignment sheet. "This is your chance to, finally, put yourself into the story."

According to Carl, an assistant professor in the University's department of English and mass communication, one story in particular grabbed her attention. "I had an affair with my high school teacher" was published in the Campus Echo along with others from the class, causing uproar on campus and in the press.

The story – written by Jessica Martin, a junior in Carl's class – recounts her affair with a band director at Parkland High School in Winston-Salem, N.C. She opens her account of the alleged affair with a painful retelling of her abortion. Riding back from Greensboro with the teacher after the abortion, she writes: "In the car I leaned my seat back and cried all the way back to Winston-Salem."

Martin says that the band director, who she calls "James Smith" in the story, also had a sexual relationship with her best friend. Her narrative then provides an account of how the relationship developed and ends with Martin exploring her reasons for engaging in the affair. "Never having someone to express my feelings to, being under my teacher was a release from my other problems," she writes.

Martin's account was quickly picked up by the Winston-Salem Journal and then by the Daily Mail, a London-based tabloid.

Winston-Salem police soon began an investigation of Terry Lamar Jones Jr., who had been the band director at Parkland High School from August 2006 to November 2008, according to a statement released by Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools.

At the time of the allegations, Jones was 24 and Martin 17. While the age of consent in North Carolina is 16, state law prohibits a sexual relationship between a high school teacher and a student. If the age differential is greater than four years the offender is charged with a felony. Each offense is punishable by 15 months in prison.

On April 25 Jones resigned from his position as band director at Shepard Magnet Middle School in Durham and turned himself in. According to the Forsyth County Sheriff's Department, Jones has been held since April 29 and his bail is set at \$500,000.

Martin's decision to provide her account and the Campus Echo's decision to run the first-person account has sparked considerable debate across campus. Jones is an NCCU alumnus; Martin's best friend, whom Martin says also had an affair with Jones, is also an NCCU student.

In a follow-up account about her experience of writing about her alleged affair with the band director, Martin described her semester as "full of experiences I will never forget.

"Who would have thought," she writes, "that I would make a stand for thousands of people … [that I would] be looked as an adult for once." She writes that she is "proud to have gained a higher respect and courage for myself, and others, as writers.

"I learned to stop doubting myself, I learned how many people on campus read the paper."

Shortly after the April 13 edition of the student newspaper was distributed, thousands of copies of the print edition disappeared under suspicious circumstances. According to NCCU campus police, tapes from surveillance cameras are being examined. Removing newspapers in such a manner is larceny.

Reaction to the story and its aftermath has been mixed.

"I personally think she shouldn't have written it," said Dominique Selby, a senior child development student. "That type of stuff is not suitable for the college newspaper. She should have taken it to the police or handled it personally."

Ravyn Johnson, a sophomore criminal justice student, agreed: "I don't think that was something that she should have done. It happened a long time ago. She just messed up his career. It was very entertaining to put in the Echo, but she shouldn't have put him on blast."

In an animated e-mail exchange, four faculty members in the department of English and mass communication questioned the Campus Echo's decision to run the personal narrative. According to one English professor it is his belief that "this student's privacy has definitely been violated – perhaps unintentionally and with her complicity," adding "it bears remarking that the eventual apprehension of her alleged violator was far less the object of the Echo publication than the possible entertainment value of her story."

One English instructor simply wrote: "What about editorial scrutiny? Ours." And later: "My major concern was that the story was ‘let loose."

But the Campus Echo editor-in-chief, Ashley Griffin, sees things differently. "These reactions make me question their motives," she said, suggesting that some faculty are critical of the decision to run the story because Jones is an NCCU alumnus and the story could damage NCCU's image.

"She writes about this three years later … Psychologically it had a big impact on her. It's good for her. It's good that she stood by her story. It makes me feel happy for her that she got this off her chest," said Griffin, who added, "I think it's a shame, a sad day that someone would find that this story was for entertainment only … That's a shame."

Griffin said that she would have to question her own integrity as a journalist and as a person if she had killed the story. "If these allegations are true; this man broke the law. Why should we cover for him?" she said.

Last year's editor-in-chief, Carlton Koonce, said this is a tough situation for an editor.

"Sometimes it's real hard to decide whether to keep or pull a story," he said. "It's hard to balance … do people really need to know this or, if I run this, am I going to ruin someone's life?" Koonce said.

According to the Campus Echo faculty adviser, Bruce DePyssler, the editor-in-chief has the final say on what runs or does not run in student newspapers.

"The very idea that I should have stepped in and silenced this student is offensive," he said. "Our role is to empower students, not to silence them.

"I simply do not understand the reasoning of faculty who oppose the editor's decision to run this first-person account. It would be the height of hypocrisy to tell students it's fine to write about the problems they have surmounted in their lives – friends gunned down, parental abandonment, parental addiction, living life with sickle cell – and then to tell one single student out of all the students who have written for the first-person series that she couldn't tell her story about something that had such a profound impact on her life."

Students were not required to write or to publish first-person accounts. Carl said she makes it clear to students that they have the option of not submitting their first person narratives to the Campus Echo. In fact, seven students who wrote first-person accounts decided not to have them published. Carl stated that Martin was eager to have her story run in the student newspaper and that she was given the option of changing her name for the story's byline.

On April 27, Ernie Suggs, a Campus Echo editor from 1987-1989 and now a political reporter with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, sensing the pressure the Campus Echo might be under, wrote a letter of support that was signed by 28 former Campus Echo editors and staff members .

Suggs wrote:

"Your paper, our paper, has gone on to produce some of the best and brightest journalists in the country, who as you can see below, have gone on to do great things. We all look forward to you all joining us soon in the professional ranks. Thanks again for keeping The Campus Echo relevant, consistent and quite frankly, the best source of news for and about North Carolina Central University."

The Campus Echo special feature series "In the First Person – True Stories from the Lives of Ten NCCU Students," has run in four editions since 2006. In the award-winning series, students have written accounts of automobile accidents, coming out as gay, breast reduction surgery, mixed-race identity, cocaine addiction, coping with sickle cell anemia and more.

Aaron Saunders writes for the Campus Echo, the student newspaper at North Carolina Central University, which originally published this article. {moshaloscan}