

Minority film report: room for respect

BY HEATHER TRAVIS

A University of Western Ontario film turns a critical eye on the treatment of minority groups on campus and charts the degree of progress from the so-called chilly climate the university was criticized for being two decades ago.

The film, tentatively titled *Respect: Western*, is produced by the Provost's Office, the Women's Safety Committee, the Vice-President (Research and International Relations), the Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children, the Student Development Centre, and the faculties of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Education and Science. It is expected to be released this fall.

Barb MacQuarrie, community director for the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children and a member of the film's advisory committee, says Western is a microcosm of the attitudes and behaviours of society as a whole.

"Campuses do reflect the social norms of the dominant society," she says. "We live in a society with very real social hierarchies."

The film includes selections from interviews conducted with 25 faculty, students, administrators and support services staff at Western, as well as focus group sessions.

Participants shared their personal experiences and analytical perspectives on topics such as safety on campus, violence against women on university campuses, as well as Aboriginal and international student concerns



Heather Travis, Western News

Barb MacQuarrie, member of the *Respect: Western* film advisory committee, says the university needs to live up its promise of offering the best student experience for all students, including minority groups.

and sexual orientation issues.

"Essentially it is about social norms and how they influence attitudes on campus ... (and) structural analysis of power relationships," she says.

The film originally started as a dating norms video to follow-up the *Chilly Climate Report* in 1989, which examined discrimination against women faculty at Western. The goal was to discuss the kinds of abuses women and other vulnerable populations were experiencing on campus, says MacQuarrie.

However, she says the urgency for a film with a broader approach to social norms and behaviours at universities became evident following the student *Gazette's* 2007 April Fool's Day spoof issue, particularly an article titled, "Labia Majora Carnage," which mocked

the Take Back the Night march and members of the Women's Issues Network.

There was an outpouring of criticism of the satirical and graphic student newspaper article, particularly for including a portrayal of the rape of student. An emotional town hall meeting followed, allowing students, faculty and community members to voice their concerns.

"The spoof issue uncovered and put under a magnifying glass some of the attitudes that were already there in day-to-day life," says MacQuarrie. "Everyone saw the need not to turn away from this ... but to face it head-on."

With the support of several campus bodies, including the administration, MacQuarrie says cameras started rolling.

Western Registrar and Vice-

Provost Roma Harris, says a forum was needed to "raise consciousness" about issues of marginalization on campus.

Harris, who was involved in the original *Chilly Climate Report*, was interviewed for the film.

"I think there were a number of different groups and individuals on campus ... who felt there were climate issues that went beyond gender issues," she says.

However, she says noticeable improvements have been made at Western since the *Chilly Climate Report*.

"The big change that I have seen is that there are people in the senior administrative group who are standing up explicitly saying they are prepared to do what it takes to make this a community where everybody's welcome," she says.

"I see the senior male leaders around taking up their responsibility to address these things," she adds. "It's not up to the women to do all this work. The people who are sitting in positions of privilege have got to get up and do something about it."

MacQuarrie stresses the film is not intended to point the finger at Western. She says the film uses Western as an allegory for issues on all campuses and the outside community.

"This isn't about saying Western isn't a welcoming or open university ... that only some kinds of people will have a good experience here," she says. "We hope it will be a valuable tool for other universities to look at certain ways certain groups are marginalized and find ways to bring them more in the community."

Video co-coordinator Bonnie

MacLachlan, Classical Studies Associate Professor & Graduate Chair and University of Western Ontario Faculty Association Equity Committee Chair, said the issues explored in the film weren't new.

"I could see there were several places on campus where people didn't feel included ... long before the spoof issue came out," she says. "Different values were colliding in an environment that promotes diversity."

She says the spirit of the video is not condemnation of Western, but promotes further changing of attitudes and behaviours towards marginalized groups.

"I am proud of Western for giving attention and funding to this project," she says.

The film will also be released with a facilitator's guide to assist discussions following the video.

Advisory committee member Rose Aquino, advisor and coordinator for the International Student Services at the Student Development Services, says the video effectively discusses a variety of campus issues and empowers minority groups.

"I think it's a first of its kind in Canada ... because there hasn't really been a tool like this," she says, adding "the students were pretty honest."

Aquino organized international student focus groups and the discussions mainly focused on comfort and safety issues, as well as racism, she says.

"It gives a practical example of actual experiences," she says. "It will give a voice to the international students when they see it."

"Western can be commended for piloting this," she adds.