

## **The Courage to Offer Strong Opinions” – Part A**

*(This case was compiled by University of Georgia journalism student Kristen Coulter for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, based on information in the University of Washington Daily and the Seattle Times.)*

Proposition 8, an amendment to the California state constitution that defined marriage as between a man and a woman, passed in on Nov. 4, 2008.

The student newspaper at the University of Washington, the Daily, decided to run two columns about gay marriage on the editorial page. On Nov.25, 2008, the Daily ran a column supporting gay marriage next to a column opposing gay marriage. Both columns were accompanied by cartoons. The cartoon next to the column arguing in favor of gay marriage showed two women holding hands. The cartoon next to the column opposing gay marriage showed a man and a sheep.

The column favoring gay marriage, which was written by Sarah Gaither, offered a standard pro-gay marriage argument. John Fay, who wrote the column opposing gay marriage, used a more offensive argument. He wrote that open homosexuality could create “social dysfunction,” and he said that the gay community’s reaction to the passing of Proposition 8 “illustrated the danger of gay marriage.” He compared legalizing gay marriage to allowing a 70 year old man to marry 10 underage girls. These comments, and the cartoon, created a massive outcry at the University of Washington.

The Daily put both columns online and they were read by thousands of people on the Internet. Many online readers opposed the content, and Fay’s article received 654 online comments to Gaither’s 96. Many readers had the strongest reaction to the anti-gay marriage cartoon. The Friday following the publication of the editorials, the Daily ran eight pages of letters to the editor.

The voices opposing the columns continued to protest. On Dec. 6, 2008, hundreds of students protested Fay’s column at a rally organized by the newly formed group, Students for a Hate Free Daily. The student of governing body passed a resolution calling for an editorial board apology or the editor’s and opinions editor’s resignations from the newspaper. Independent readers made similar requests.

### ***Discuss:***

Was it a wise decision to run the columns and the cartoons? Was it courageous to provide readers with these strong opinions?

How should the newspaper address its angry readers? Should Editor Sarah Jelgum issue an apology?

Should Jelgum fire the opinions editor, or should she resign?

## **The Courage to Offer Strong Opinions” – Part B**

In response to the Dec. 6 rally against the Daily’s publication of Fay’s column, Jelgum said she had no intention of apologizing.

But in January, Jelgum took steps to explain the Daily’s decision to publish the two columns and the two cartoons.

She attended a forum on Jan. 27, 2009 to address questions and criticisms. Jelgum told people at the forum that she considered apologizing. But after the governing organization passed the resolution, an apology “would just sound forced.”

Jelgum said she was surprised by the intensely negative reaction to the cartoon of the man and the sheep.

“If I had the choice to run the illustration again, I would not,” Jelgum said. “The intent of the cartoon was far from how it was actually received.”

Also responding to criticism, Jelgum wrote a column on Jan. 14, 2009. She told readers that the Daily’s publication standards are online. She also explained why she did not apologize.

“Last quarter, I spoke with many fellow journalists about my decision not to print an apology, and my decision hasn’t changed. I believe a printed apology would only be a surface fix. To me, the gay community and the discussion about gay rights deserve more than that. This means having conversations among different communities on this campus, including people we may or may not agree with,” she wrote.

Jelgum wrote that the freedom of speech will allow individuals to share ideas and understand tolerance.

“The only way this will happen is if we exercise and protect our right to free speech,” Jelgum wrote. “A printed apology would actually say to some members of this community that their opinions cannot be expressed and should be censored. My hope is that our community never comes to a point where some of its members feel they don’t have a voice.”

### ***Discuss:***

Should Jelgum have refused to apologize? Was it courageous of her to defend the columns because of her belief in the notion of freedom of speech? What are the limits of freedom of speech?

## **The Courage to Offer Strong Opinions” – Epilogue**

Jelgum wrote several editorials explaining her decisions relating to the newspaper and publishing the controversial columns.

“The Daily staff, this campus and I have all grown this quarter. Challenges have come up in every sense, and we’ve met them to the best of our ability,” she wrote in a column at the conclusions of 2008. “I’ve watched my staff grow and have learned with them what exactly it means to be a student newspaper – to be the voice of a campus – and we’ve formed new ideas about how to better serve our community.”

She wrote that freedom of speech was the main value that she and her staff learned about during the term.

“Free speech is for everyone. It’s not just for the majority, and it’s not just for the minority. It’s not just for people you agree with, and it’s not just for people you disagree with. It’s for you, and it’s for every person on this campus and in this community.”

Jelgum said her understanding of free speech made her want to hear from readers.

“I encourage every member of the UW community to be willing to be a part of this conversation while respecting differing beliefs and upholding everyone’s right to feel safe and be heard. To protect our right to say what we believe, we must protect the same right of those we don’t agree with,” she wrote. “Without that, we cannot and will not grow, learn or be able to serve one another.”