Resident assistants rally against alleged racial aggression and harassment by Public Safety officers

BY MAX DENNING
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Resident assistants at Ithaca College are protesting what they are calling racial profiling and harassment by Public Safety officers against students of color.

On the evening of Sept. 2, an estimated 30 resident assistants linked arms, formed two lines and silently stood on each side of the entrance to Emerson Suites. Each student held a different white sign embalazoned with a phrase protesting the actions of Public Safety officers during RA training sessions in August and the ongoing treatment of students of color on campus.

“I am not a criminal. I’m a student and also an RA. “When will you speak to us, not at us?” “Do #BlackLivesMatter to Terri Stewart?”

Two Public Safety officers, Sergeant Terry O’Pray and Master Patrol Officer Jon Elmore, made comments described by RAs as “racially insensitive,” “aggressive” and “invalidating” during RA-training sessions Aug. 18. The group of RAs had asked Terri Stewart, director of the Office of Public Safety and Emergency Management, for an opportunity to address the issue directly with the two officers, but the officers have not attended subsequent meetings.

The comment from O’Pray that sparked the RAs’ anger was a dismissal of an RA’s comments are looking for direct-action steps moving forward between Public Safety and RAs, not those who want to address O’Pray directly.

Junior Taranjit Singh said none of the RAs who are upset about Public Safety’s comments are looking for direct-action steps before they address O’Pray.

“Public Safety is retaining the services of outside consulting firm Training for Change to facilitate direct conversations between RAs and Public Safety officers, but those discussions haven’t been scheduled yet, Stewart said.

INITIAL CONFRONTATION

At the Aug. 18 training, Ithaca College RAs were in two separate sessions led by Public Safety officers: one training RAs about what to do if there was an active shooter at the college, the other talking about drugs and weapons on campus.

During the active shooter training, Singh said O’Pray mentioned ISIS and the stereotypical appearances of Muslims but didn’t say that most individuals who commit mass casualty shootings are white males. Singh said this omission, along with the fact that O’Pray didn’t mention the violence of campus police officers against students of color, caused him to speak up.

“I posed this question... Most of the campus violence that does occur in America is between the campus police and students, specifically students of color,” Singh said. “Recently the Cincinnati incident where the campus police officer shot the black student (sic) ... what does that mean here on campus? What are we doing here on campus to address that in terms of diversity training?”

Singh was referring to the death of Sam DuBose, who was unarmed when he was killed by University of Cincinnati police officer Ray Tensing during a traffic stop. Tensing was charged with the murder of the 45-year-old DuBose July 29. The response from O’Pray was not what Singh had hoped for.

“He took it very personally and basically denied that things like this happen on campus,” he said. “He denied that things like racial profiling exist here.”

Singh said the officer then alluded to the
Terri Stewart, director of Public Safety, walks past protesters. She said Public Safety officers participate in ongoing diversity training.

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arrest of Sandra Bland, a woman who was found dead in jail after she was arrested for allegedly saulting an officer during a July 10 traffic stop and not using a turn signal, when he said, “Everytime someone doesn’t turn on a turn signal, I pull them over.”

Singh said he then brought up to the officer that students of color at the college had video and audio recordings of aggressive Public Safety officers. “You saying that things like that don’t occur on this campus are blatant white privilege and ignorance,” Singh said he told O’Pray. “There’s a disconnect between student and students of color on campus, and until we address that, we won’t move forward.”

Singh said O’Pray responded “very aggressively” and said he himself got aggressive as well. Singh was then pulled out by Megan Williams, West Tower residence director.

At the same time during the active shooter response session, Bunatal was sitting in the other session about drugs and weapons on campus.

Bunatal said initially the “cocky” demeanor of Patrol Officer Jono Elmore made her upset. Bunatal said Elmore’s comments about shooting someone for having a BB gun made her angry. Specifically, it related to it to the police’s killing of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy who was shot while carrying a black BB gun in November 2014.

“Even if we don’t want to know what is going on with Black Lives Matter or the movement or just the state of black bodies, you still shouldn’t say something like that,” she said.

Bunatal said as the session neared its end, she and fellow RA Yaw Aidoo walked out.

Singh filed a formal complaint against O’Pray, which is currently being investigated by the Office of University Resources. However, O’Pray is not on leave. No formal complaint has been filed against Elmore.

Comments at the training sessions had a triggering effect due to the experiences of Bunatal, Aidoo’s comments about being the only one of their kind, and not addressing comments made about the female resident as well. An audio recording of the conversation provided by Bunatal includes a man identified as Willman saying the frequency of the use of the N-word wasn’t directed toward her, the resident couldn’t respond without also risking being judgmentally referred.

Aidoo said the officer was equating the comments made by the female resident to the use of racial and sexist slurs made by the white male student.

Bunatal said the incident was an example of Public Safety officers not being prepared to handle racial incidents.

PUBLIC SAFETY’S RESPONSE

Stewart said Public Safety officers receive ongoing diversity training as part of the college’s nondiscrimination policy.

“I’ll reference our recent training, which is, we exercise fair and impartial policing, and that’s where we train,” she said. “Everyone holds bias. Our job is to provide training for our officers to be able to, one, be aware of, and to be able to question, secondly, to be motivated to counteract… explicit and implicit bias.”

O’Pray’s and Elmore’s comments caused Stewart to plan the Aug. 25 meeting between Public Safety and RAs. Stewart wasn’t present for the comments made by the officers, so the meeting was in part to hear the details from the RAs.

“In short, we were trying to figure out what happened,” Stewart said. “It was very clear to us that there was an exchange or exchanges between Public Safety and our residential assistants that left our students feeling invalidated and unsupported.”

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In a May 2014 statement, Singh said he was focused on equality looking on.

But he said speaking with Singh in the past year led to calls for a change in the Public Safety training program, which was supposed to address the issue and called it a “classroom experience” that was not useful in the training.

The meeting was supposed to add training for our officers to acknowledge and to apologize for the events.

“The purpose was to acknowledge and to apologize for the series of events, including that Tuesday night forum,” Stewart said. “And to really reassure students that we are committed to resolving this matter moving forward.”

Singh felt the apology was canned. “It’s more like another quick fix instead of addressing the issue,” she said.

The RAs then began to plan their protest.

Also in attendance at the meeting was Richard Richardson, provost and vice president for educational affairs, who provided The Ithacan with a statement regarding the RAs’s Sept. 1, 2015. “In the past year there has been increased attention given to centuries-old patterns of violence against people of color in our country,” he said in the statement. “Recent events on our campus focus our concerns on disrespect here at Ithaca College: much to my dismay, at a recent meeting of Resident Assistants, I heard from a number of people of color that they do not feel safe on our campus. I affirm the college’s expectation that all members of our community, especially our Public Safety officers, are to treat others with respect and compassion.”

SEPT. 2 PROTEST

As the RAs held their signs in silence, staff members from Resi-

dential Life and Public Safety filed into the Emerson Suites. A

crowd of the staff members slowly walked through the tunnel the RAs formed, reading each sign. Most quickly walked by and into the closed meeting.

“They power-walked by,” Singh said. “All the campus police

officers, Provost Rikfin, Terri Stewart, especially, power-walked straight through, uncomfortable as fuck.”

As the meeting’s scheduled start time approached, the protest-

gathered and walked inside the meeting room as a group.

The protesters stood in front of the faculty members and other staff members from Residential Life and Public Safety who were sitting around round tables. Among those sitting were Rikfin, Stewart, Frantry and a handful of Public Safety officers.

A Residential Life employee closed the doors to the meeting room. No reporters or photographers were allowed inside.

Behind the closed doors, Singh said, the protesters stood in si-

lence looking on.

One of the RAs said Richardson broke the silence and began addressing the protesters.

“Terri said Richardson said protesting was outside the ‘classroom experience’ that was planned for the meeting,” Singh said. “He thought Rich-

ardson shifted the accountability and responsibility off the protesters and away from Public Safety officers.”

Bryan said the RAs’ needs haven’t been addressed in their meetings with Public Safety.

“All we really have done is asked for our experiences to be validated, and that still has not happened,” she said.

None of the RAs who surround-

ed the room in silence with their signs were talked to or addressed by any of the staff members who were sitting.

Bryan said the meeting was over for her when Stewart walked past without looking at the protesters.

“I strongly believe the RAs walked out of the meeting after Richardson announced that small-

group discussions were going to begin.

“At that point, I realized this was another bullshit thing that they were doing,” Singh said. “I won’t have time to say the same thing in 30 different conversations over and over. To tell you the same solutions over and over again. For you to do the same thing like it’s a call to progress, but it’s not. How many times do we have to tell you the same exact thing?”

From left, sophomore Charintel Ikiedem, sophomore Cathy Tran and junior Deanna Payne stand with signs. RAs are asking to meet and speak directly with two officers who made comments they found offensive, by any of the ITHACAN PHOTO/TOMMY BATTISTELLI