



Sexual Harassment on the Adventist Campus

A year before the Clarence Thomas hearings, Andrews University learned about on-campus sexual harassment.

by Patricia Nash and David Lofthouse

Perhaps as many as 20 to 30 percent of women students are sexually harassed by faculty during their college years, say several surveys at universities across the United States. If these figures were translated into Adventist college populations in the U.S., from 1,942 to 2,913 female students would have been harassed on Adventist campuses in 1990. Statistics for the number of male students harassed are not as readily available.

The Andrews University administration has led the way in cooperating with its student newspaper, the Student Movement. Perhaps other Adventist colleges and academy administrations will follow Andrews' leadership and find ways to confront and prevent sexual harassment in their schools. The following article is reprinted with permission from the May 15, 1991, Student Movement.

— The Editors

When she wrote this article, Patricia Nash was a senior journalism major and editor of the Student Movement. David Lofthouse, who assisted in research for the essay, was a senior communication major. Nash and Lofthouse graduated from Andrews University in the spring of 1991.

"I went in one day to ask him something about an assignment," she says. "He closed the door and we talked about the project. Then just as I was standing up to leave, he kind of put his arms around me and kissed me on the lips."

She, in this case, was a student. He, a teacher. A married teacher. A married teacher at an Adventist university.

She was shocked and quickly mumbled something like "got to go now" and rushed out the door. "When I left his office I was shaking—I felt disgusted. . . . I felt like washing my lips," she says.

Another department, another married teacher, another student, but the same university. The story is slightly different. Here a student says her advisor would shut his door and offer hugs when he thought she looked discouraged. "I thought at first that maybe teachers are more responsive and caring here because it's a Christian environment."

She says it took her two quarters to realize there was a problem. "I felt like he was trying to be a dad, when in reality he was using his position to overcome people." She tells of

times when he would kiss her on the forehead and grab her hand to pray with her—always alone in a closed-door office or room.

And yet another story comes from a student who says she told her roommate for months that one of her teachers “was just too ‘touchy-feely.’” Then one day “he came up behind me and slid his hand down to feel my bottom.” She was so startled she didn’t say anything.

These stories have been compiled from Andrews University students and former students and are based on their narration of real experiences. And these incidents, like all sexual harassment cases, cause real feelings.

What It Is

Sexual harassment can be in the form of touches, jokes, pinups, as well as blatant propositions, according to Patricia Wells, district executive in the Michigan Department of Civil Rights branch in Benton Harbor.

In short, the legal definition, according to Michigan and federal law, includes unwelcome sexual advances and verbal or physical conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile environment for employment or education. “The key word is *unwelcome*,” Wells says.



What to Do

First, let the person know you don’t appreciate it, says Wells. Say something like, “I’m not comfortable” or “I don’t appreciate it when you touch me like that.”

“It doesn’t have to be confrontational,” says Meredith Jones, chair of the university’s Women’s Concerns Advisory. “But that’s where you have to start to stop the problem.”

Tell someone. “To this day, I don’t look at him,” says one student of the alleged harasser. Later another student suggested she go talk to the chair of the department. “I didn’t go because I was embarrassed,” she says.

Fear, embarrassment, and shame often do prevent victims from letting someone know about their experiences. “Tell somebody,” says Wells. “Don’t try to carry it alone. Eventually it will affect your studies or job productivity.”

Jones adds that “keeping it to yourself isn’t going to help anyone. Realize it’s not your fault and go to a person you feel comfortable telling.”

Like rape, sexual harassment is often underreported. “Women often deal with sexual harassment indirectly,” says Stella Greig, university ombudsperson. “For example, if it is coming from a teacher, they would drop the class rather than confront the teacher; if it is coming from a boss or male colleague, they would avoid being near the individual at work or perhaps even quit their job.”

Greig also says another possible reason for not reporting a problem is not knowing whom to go to.

If you feel you are being sexually harassed by a teacher, Andrews University policy in the student handbook says you should report the problem to the chair of the department in which the teacher is working. If the problem is with a work colleague, you should talk to the supervisor of the aggrieved party.

The policy also says that you should go to

the next higher authority, such as a dean, when the department chair or work supervisor is the person doing the harassing.

According to the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, the university has a legal responsibility to act on the complaint immediately—"within 24 hours of when it was reported," Wells says. The employer is liable in sexual harassment cases, as are all parties to the harassment, according to the precedents set in court on sexual harassment cases, she says.

Other Places to Go for Help

Women who are sexually harassed often find it difficult to tell their experience to a man in an authority position, so they don't tell anyone at all.

"Female students aren't going to go to the male teachers," says one teacher, who for a time was the only woman in her department.

One female staff member says that "when I became head of the department I got a whole flood of incidents reported to me."

Now the university has a female ombudsperson. And though the ombudsperson is supposed to be a "last resort," Greig is willing to be consulted early on.

"I have found that even when speaking with another woman, women are reluctant to discuss and reveal the details of what has happened," she says. "But after they have done so, they get some feeling of relief."

Greig explains that she will help the student find the best way to deal with the situation. Sometimes she goes to talk to the department chair or work supervisor with the student, but it is always the student's decision.

For help outside the university or job setting, you may go to the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, or the civil rights branch in any area.

In the Andrews area, if you dial 925-7044, a civil rights department field representative will immediately listen to your complaint, and then

help you decide what to do next, which may include filing a formal complaint.

The Andrews Problem

Greig says she has worked with three sexual harassment cases, though two occurred before she became ombudsperson two years ago. "I am happy to say that all three problems were resolved," she says.

Arthur Coetzee, vice president for academic administration, also says he has worked with two to three cases. All have been "satisfactorily dealt with in terms of what evidence we had and the response of the offender." The problems were discussed with the university president, he says.

Sometimes part of the problem is a lack of official complaints and notes to support a termination of employment, says Don Smith,* chair of a department at Andrews. "When I became chair, I began creating a paper trail. Though a lot of people thought it was the first complaint, really it was only one of several that had never been documented."

Smith reported the problem to the dean and then to the vice president. "The administration took it very seriously," he says. "They didn't brush it off at all."

According to Smith, a warning was issued to the teacher and he was told that "if there was another complaint, his job was on the line."

In the two or three years following the warning, Smith says he has not heard of any more problems.

However, some feel that sexual harassment problems cannot be corrected until the problem-causers are gone. "It's common knowledge and it's gotten to the point where everyone makes jokes about how weird he is," says student Lisa Wilson,* who made a sexual harassment complaint to her department chair about a teacher three years ago.

"There's been so many complaints, yet it seems to the students that nothing has happened," she says.

But according to one chair in a department where several complaints were received, measures have been taken to curb a sexual harassment problem.

Though he declined to be specific, Chair Joe Michaels* says, "We've made some moves in the department, and since then we haven't had the problems that we had before." The teacher was informed that if the problems appear again it will be "serious grounds for dismissal," Michaels says.

Since this situation was dealt with, no problems have been brought to his attention in the last year.

Firing a person for sexual harassment is a very serious matter, Michaels explains, and the institution should be able to back up its decision in case it is faced with a lawsuit.

"The problem may not be totally eradicated and could surface again," he says. But without enough evidence, the school just has to wait. "The advice from 'above' was to make these moves and see what happens," Michaels says.

In one case several years ago a teacher did lose his job over a sexual harassment complaint from a student, says Jan Richards,* an Andrews teacher. The student told her parents, who called the university. "The parents gave an ultimatum: 'you get him out or we will sue,'" Richards says. The student reported that her teacher had called her into his office and hugged and kissed her.

"The only reason that it got reported when it did was because he did it to the wrong person," Richards says. "I don't think there are very many who have the courage. If you feel guilty, if you feel you did something to cause it, then you won't report it."

In this situation as in others, it was common knowledge in the department among the students. "I found out afterward that they would try to avoid him," Richards says.

Unfortunately, this situation might have been avoided: the teacher had previously taught at another Adventist school and had been fired because of a sexual harassment problem.

Most sexual harassment problems occur with a male harasser and a female victim; however, the reverse does happen occasion-

ally. And the harassment is not always from teacher to student. "There have been times when I've felt sort of harassed by students," says Doug Jones, assistant professor of English. He explains that to him harassment means "anytime a person's physical or verbal presence makes a

person feel uncomfortable."

In particular, Jones recalls a former student who was very aggressive and open to inappropriate behavior. "I just pulled back and turned on a whole lot of negative signs," he says.

Only a Misunderstanding?

In some cases the "victim" is not the only one who feels victimized. In one such situation, an Andrews teacher was accused by a student of making a suggestive comment. "The comment was actually made to protect the student from what could turn into a serious problem," says the teacher, but it was interpreted by the student to be a sexual advance.

The situation was further complicated by the teacher's reputation for being a touching,

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back-patting, and hugging kind of person. "I come from a loving family where touching is part of showing that you care," the accused teacher says. "Unfortunately, in today's society, school is not the place for that kind of expression, and I learned that lesson the hard way."

According to this instructor, no real changes were made in the department after the allegations, but the administration warned the teacher to be particularly careful for the next two years. "I am sure that if the administration had any doubt as to my trustworthiness, I would be canned. . . . The administration doesn't put up with nonsense."

Now the teacher says, "What concerns me the most is that now I am afraid to touch students and express my care and concern for them like I used to."

"Good!" says one colleague, who says that at least five people in the department told her they felt uncomfortable with the teacher's actions. "Personal empathy is sometimes used as justification for physical contact," she says. "However, there's a difference between the momentary touch of empathy and the sustained amorous touch. Even though the person giving it doesn't sense it, the person receiving it has the right to feel uncomfortable and try to stop it."

Not all students who feel sexually harassed actually hold it against the person. Sally Campbell,* an Andrews graduate, says she finally told her boss that she felt uncomfortable with his touching. But the incident did not bring any hard feelings in her mind.

"I talked to him myself, but I never went any further because of my respect for him," she says. "I know he has a genuine heart and that he doesn't know how to make a distinction between affection with his wife and relationships with students."

"Under no condition do I ever want to see any harm done to him because of his lack of being able to make a distinction," Campbell says.

Later, the chair of the department called to ask about the situation after several other complaints had been made, she explains. However, Campbell didn't tell the chair much because "of my personal loyalty and feelings" toward her former teacher.

Campbell places part of the blame upon herself. "I allowed myself to be in those situations," she explains.

Now that her teacher has been confronted with the situation, "chances are he's at least a little more sensitive or selective in his relationships with students," Campbell says.

However, whether a sexual harassment case is a misunderstanding or not, Vice President Coetzee says he must proceed with the assumption that the person is making a valid complaint and investigate the situation.

Faculty may use the faculty grievance policy if they feel they are unjustly disciplined.

How to Prevent It

Teachers and students alike must realize that work relations and personal relations are different, Wells says. "Men were accustomed to doing things they didn't realize were illegal."

Her advice is: If you're not sure, don't do it. Stifle a joke. Refrain from the touch on the shoulder.

Coetzee gave a "word of caution to those who are friendly and outgoing": Express your feelings with reserve where no possible misunderstanding can result.

"I think teachers—male teachers in particular—need to be very aware of the possibility of being misunderstood," says Doug Jones. He explains that he rarely closes his office door, even if a student suggests it.

Cultural differences also need to be taken into account, especially at a place like Andrews. "We have a multicultural student body and faculty, and we have varying expectations and norms regarding appropriate behavior of

men towards women and vice versa,” Ombudsperson Greig explains.

“One culture’s way of showing friendliness may be another’s way of signalling a move towards intimacy. Whether the offender meant to offend or not, the offense is very real to the woman.”

Coetzee agrees. “It is something we ought to be doubly careful with in a multicultural setting,” he says. “The same action could be quite acceptable under one culture and offensive in a different culture.”

Of course cultural differences shouldn’t stop you from saying, “In my culture that’s not acceptable.”

Help Stop It

Sexual harassment at Andrews is probably not a rampant problem, but it does occur. And one situation is one too many. Share this information with others. Encourage people to be courageous enough to solve the problem.

The Department of Civil Rights brochure on sexual harassment offers an additional advice: “Above all, don’t be forced into ‘going along with the crowd’ and accepting sexual harassment as ‘the way things are’ or as a joking matter.”

*A pseudonym.