

points of view

Male exploiters must try harder

MY DEC. 5 COLUMN described how I was accused of sexual chauvinism in a university course I was teaching. I invited you to judge my guilt or innocence and promised to excerpt your best analyses and also reveal how the class judged me.

My classroom "offense" was to choose three consecutive men to lead initial discussions of case studies, causing a female student to complain to a classmate. After another student overheard and reported her remark to me, I wrote a case study on the incident itself and had another female student lead its analysis.

The study defensively featured a long list of my pro-female initiatives such as hiring or promoting women to principalships. I had been unaware of the complainant's identity until she vehemently scolded me in class for embarrassing her by writing and using this case. Her discomfort made me regret doing it, but a majority of the male and female students excoriated me during the discussion.

YOU DID THE same. Your most incisive analysis came from National Organization for Women activist Geraldine Barclay of Birmingham, who admonished me for a "cavalier approach to the 'issues,'" but dismissed the incident itself as trivial. Troy's Helen Welsch chided my student for stirring the proverbial "tempest in a teapot." Alas, I cannot let myself off the hook so easily. As I confessed to my class in recapping its discussion, my act — albeit subconscious — was indeed chauvinistic! If one single hypersensitive soul is disturbed by an act so seemingly inconsequential, then the act is wrong — and that it was committed by a male in a "position of power" within a male-dominated society makes it doubly so.

This sequence has taught me two things: 1. Even an old human rights advocate like me can still become more sensitized to others' rights; and 2. it's going to take a long time to undo the psychic damage males



John Telford

In power have done to women. In fact, it will be understandable if many women never become able to completely trust us.

Consider this: In 1991 the state of Michigan refused to pay for the abortion of a woman impregnated by gang rape. U.S. senators who didn't believe the extremely credible Anita Hill argued that no other woman testified to having been harassed by Clarence Thomas, and sworn statements of women who said they'd been assaulted by William Kennedy Smith were disregarded during his rape trial.

MEAN GENERALLY continue to pay a lower social and economic price for any kind of sexual mishap, whether or not it originated consensually. In fact, in the AIDS/Magic Johnson era, men were frequently admired for multiple sexual exploits, while women who similarly indulged were disdained. The pervasive pornography industry also dehumanizes women and incites aggression toward them.

Meanwhile, a national magazine picks Smith as an "intriguing personality" of the year along with Johnson, Al Rose, Pee-wee Herman and serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer!

Considering all this, my one student's concern about the gender chosen first to lead case analyses does appear comparatively puerile, yet it remains a symptom of how women are regarded — sometimes even by themselves. Thus it illustrates a man-to-man, woman-to-woman and man-to-man communication gap which both sexes should try hard to close in order to stop sexual chauvinism and exploitation. And men, as the major exploiters, must try harder.

Tough stance needs justice

COUNTY PROSECUTOR Richard Thompson reveals in maintaining a tough stance on crime.

"My goal is to enforce the law and send a clear message," he says. "People who violate the law in Oakland County will pay for their crimes."

Few in Oakland County — with the exception of the criminals — would disagree with that.

The problem lies in Thompson's definition of crime — which he broadens to rest not necessarily on the law but on his own moral convictions.

It is this definition which has been disputed at various turns by police, judges and the citizens themselves.

Case 1 — Thompson's instigation of raids on video stores last summer for carrying pornographic materials didn't have the support of some Oakland County police departments.

West Bloomfield police Chief

Ronald Cronin said his cops had better things to do with their time. And Southfield police said they would investigate only if they get complaints. Even Farmington police Chief William Dwyer, who said he would enforce Thompson's edict, declined to have his department judge what's obscene. They'll send it to the prosecutor for review.

Case 2 — A number of Oakland County judges are on record that Thompson refuses to plea bargain cases which wouldn't make any difference in the sentencing and has a history of filing charges more serious than are warranted by the crime.

The result is bogged down court dockets and failure to convict for the greater offense. Then the court loses all jurisdiction and has no authority to impose counseling or other meaningful rehabilitation.

Case 3 — Last week a survey by Market Opinion Research of



Judith Doner Berne

Farmington Hills showed citizens throughout the metro area — and most strongly in Oakland County — disagreed with Thompson's prosecution on murder charges of Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

Thompson got a citizens' grand jury to indict Kevorkian for assisting two women with their wish to commit suicide rather than face prolonged illness leading to death.

The survey found support for legislation allowing doctor-assisted suicide was strongest in Oakland County.

It is Thompson's second attempt to charge Kevorkian with murder.

The first was thrown out of court by Clarkson district Judge Gerald McNally who ruled that since Michigan has no law against assisted suicide, Kevorkian is within his rights and the law.

Thompson, who is up for election in November, learned his trade over years as chief assistant prosecutor under L. Brooks Patterson. Now Patterson, in private practice, says, "I see the office as a tad tougher to negotiate with."

Oakland County wants an aggressive prosecutor who will maintain safe streets. But it also wants a reputation for justice and making the charges fit the crime — when indeed a crime actually has been committed.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

His strategy wins one for little guy

EVERYBODY HAS stories about shopping for cars. I won't tell you mine. Instead, I'll tell you my father's. I'll restore your faith in purchasing automobiles.

This happened about 20 years ago, when I was 17. My father, Curt, took me along while he shopped for a car.

We went to a Buick dealer. Curt scanned the lot and saw a car he liked. We went into the showroom, where we were promptly shown into a sales rep's office.

The sales rep put a couple small napkins down in front of us, and cups of coffee on the napkins. Curt told him what car he was interested in, and to please figure out a price.

THE SALES REP fired up his adding machine. While he was doing that, Curt took the napkin, wrote something on it and put the napkin, face down, back on the sales rep's desk.

About a yard of adding machine tape later, the sales rep triumphantly tore off the last bit of paper and handed it to my father. In turn, my father handed him the napkin.



Philip Sherman

My father ignored the adding machine tape. The sales rep looked at the figure on the napkin and said, "What's this?" My father said, "That's what I'm paying for the car."

The sales rep started jumping up and down, saying the equivalent of "no way." My father calmly stood his ground.

The sales rep went and got his manager. They both started jumping up and down, chorusing no way. My father quietly told them to settle down and said we were going to have lunch, and to please have the car ready by 3 p.m. They said the car wouldn't be ready. We left the dealership.

ONCE WE WERE in my father's car, I asked where we were going next to look for a car. He informed me, quietly, that we had just bought one.

After lunch, we went to the bank. My father came out with a small envelope and tucked it in the inner pocket of his suit. We drove back to

the Buick dealership.

The car Curt had picked out was waiting in front of the dealership, freshly washed and prepped. Some guy was standing there with a screwdriver waiting to transfer the license plates. Curt went into the dealership, reappeared five minutes later, and we drove the new Buick home.

I was impressed. I didn't know what had made the sales rep and his manager change their minds. I still don't. Curt won't tell me. But that's not the point. The point is that every now and then, the little guy wins a big one.

Philip A. Sherman is editor of the West Bloomfield/Lakes Eccentric.

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