

Outrage at Auburn

By Joy Buchanan

In direct contrast to Auburn University's ongoing attempts to increase diversity and multicultural interaction in its student body, campus chapters of Beta Theta Pi and Delta Sigma Phi threw two Halloween parties at which a number of fraternity members painted their faces black and dressed in Ku Klux Klan garb. They put nooses around the necks of the fraternity brothers in black face. Fraternity members danced in Afro wigs and ostentatious jewelry as they wore the colors and letters of the prominent black fraternity, Omega Psi Phi. The members of the two fraternities partied the night away and posed for photos later posted on the Internet.

Octavius Walton, the president of the university's Omega Psi Phi chapter, posted the photos on the fraternity's university web site, intending to use them to make a case to Auburn's administration.

Peter Pepinsky, Special Assistant for Marketing and Public Relations in the Student Affairs office at Auburn, said that the administration first learned of the photos on Nov. 5. Within four hours, said Pepinsky, Beta Theta Pi and Delta Sigma Phi were officially suspended and the university's interim president, William Walker, had ordered a full investigation.

That evening, Matt Furin, chapter president of Delta Sigma Phi, apologized on behalf of his fraternity at a meeting of the Black Student Union. Zac Gibbs, chapter president of Beta Theta Pi, also issued an apology and said that the chapter would seek a minority faculty advisor to act as the chapter's diversity director.

Apparently their efforts were too little, too late. Within a week, fraternity representatives from the respective national headquarters arrived at Auburn and withdrew the fraternities' charters. Hours later

the university withdrew recognition of the fraternities and they were disbanded.

The ensuing investigation resulted in the expulsion of a total of 15 fraternity members. The university was adamant about punishing the offending students and fostering an atmosphere of cultural sensitivity on the campus. President Walker said he wanted to organize a task

Rainbow/PUSH Coalition approached Omega Psi Phi and offered their assistance. Curiously, Omega Psi Phi turned down the offers and said, according to Pepinsky, that it was their university and their problem, and that they would handle it.

Although there appeared to be unity on the campus, Pepinsky said some people were saying, "I told you there were deep-seated racial prejudices at this university and now we have proof." Others suggested, "We're going awfully hard on some fraternity [boys] who did some things that they now say were stupid and insensitive."

The expelled fraternity members, their parents and their lawyers agreed with the latter statement. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, former members of Beta Theta Pi sued the president of the university, the vice president of student affairs Wes Williams, the board of trustees and their own national organization for violation of their First Amendment rights and \$300 million in damages.

A week later, Alabama Circuit Court Judge Robert Harper reinstated 10 of the 15 expelled students. All 10 were Beta brothers. Delta Sigma Phi recently filed suit as well.



Top: At Auburn University in Alabama, two all-white fraternities (Beta Theta Pi and Delta Sigma Phi) wore blackface and KKK robes to Halloween parties, some even going so far as to simulate a lynching.

force to establish a multicultural center.

The student body in general seemed to support the actions taken by the university. "[We] exerted a strong effort as a university to really air this whole issue," Pepinsky said. He went on to say that the incident was embarrassing for the university, but that "some good was coming out of it."

The incidents also appeared to rally the students and administration around the issue of racism and intolerance. Napo Monasterio, editor of Auburn University's campus newspaper, *The Plainsmen*, said that the incidents were "no joke" to the student body and that "everybody was on the same page."

Pepinsky also pointed out that prominent black organizations including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the NAACP and the



Top: Frat members seen wearing Omega Psi Phi shirts in blackface and afro wigs. Omega Psi Phi is the second oldest black fraternity in the nation founded in 1911.