

The Story of Jim Keith and the Missing Community Service Award

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As if Guilford couldn't get any more political than it already has, students last Wednesday were witness to the Spring Awards Convocation. Normally a time for the institution to recognize those who gave more than necessary to their college, this year's convocation was mired in more behind-the-scenes politicking than most people realize.

To describe what happened, let's go back to late January when the campus learned that Jim Keith, the director of internships and service learning, would not be back in the fall. It seemed at the time that he was being let go as part of all the budget cutbacks underway at the time.

However, those who knew what was going on and were willing to talk about it said Keith was fired for less pragmatic reasons: that his relationships with other administrators were often tenuous because his philosophy about the college was not "corporate" enough. In short, he concentrated too much on the students.

Ever since this announcement was made, most of us have been hoping to hear all of the above expressed by someone of authority. We wanted to hear them say that Jim's contract wasn't renewed because he didn't get along with the powers that be.

However, we heard nothing but the straight party line: Budget cuts, budget cuts, budget cuts.

But the awards convocation proved that there are other powers at work besides the budget axe. According to a source with connections to the Board of

Visitors, this year's winner of the annual Community Service Award was none other than (you guessed it) Jim Keith. Yet, for some reason, Jim was not presented with this award at the convocation.

Unfortunately the only explanation is that the process was interfered with—and it was.

After the Board of Visitors' Selection Committee completed its vote tallying, it found that Jim Keith was voted by Guilford as the person who contributed the most to the area of community service. Now, the committee isn't obligated to select the person with the most votes, but it stands to reason that as the top vote-getter, Jim would be the one to receive the award.

But the Powers That Be decided that positive publicity for a person they had just fired wouldn't be positive publicity for the school. Therefore, the committee never made its selection, and the Awards Convocation contained no mention of the 1991 winner of the Community Service Award.

Therefore, I would like to take it upon myself to bestow this award which the administration has chosen not to acknowledge. So, to James French Keith, who has shown the truest respect for the Quaker ideal of community service, and to James French Keith, described by students in this newspaper as having "irreplaceable" experience and "unmatchable" connections to Guilford: Congratulations for winning the 1991 Award for Community Service. You've earned it.

Congratulations, Jim, and good luck wherever you may be come fall.

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Openness

> continued from page 2

within the college. Some of the people I interviewed were so paranoid about speaking on the issue that they were essentially reduced to uttering nonsense.

Perhaps any institution is more or less plagued with such unconstructive phenomena. Does this mean, however, that we should excuse it at Guilford? I was told by one employee of the college, "off the record," that mistrust and apprehension are to be expected when personnel cuts become a reality. Perhaps so, but what bothers me is the irony that a Quaker institution like Guilford could allow any issue, no matter how sensitive, to dissolve into such suspicion, dishonesty and confusion.

What channels of communication Guilford utilizes in such situations clearly broke down in this instance. As a result, the lack of communication is affecting all areas of the campus. Students are frustrated and suspicious as to why Keith, of all people, was fired, as well as by the lack of clarity and information concerning the future of Guilford's service learning programs; various faculty are paranoid, suspicious, and unable to ask probing questions, perhaps because of fear or ignorance, when given the opportunity; and the administration appears excessively hesitant and defensive, muddled in their statements concerning the issue, and more eager to talk about ends rather than means.

Another interesting aspect of this situation was the fact that large portions of faculty and students have failed to persistently ask the necessary questions. In an attempt to monitor the collective pulse of both groups, I looked for leads from the representative bodies of both constituencies.

Unfortunately, I was unable to solicit much of anything from either faculty meetings or the Community Senate. Faculty meetings barely scratched the surface of the issue. Likewise, Senate was at a loss to probe deeper into the question, choosing to explain the budget cuts in vague, general terms and to express the customary concern over the effects cuts may have on areas of the campus such as internships. Faculty and students have also appeared afraid and uncertain as to how to direct their criticisms, thereby muddling the issue even further.

In conclusion, I will say that one agonizing truth for me is that I was unable to report a great deal of information in this story which I felt was relevant, yet could not be fully substantiated. Generally, I have no qualms about not printing unsubstantiated information since it deals less in fact and more in fiction. Unfortunately, in my coverage of the Keith article, I found little comfort in this consideration. I am saddened to think that perhaps one reason I could not substantiate information is not

that it was false, but more that certain individuals were afraid to come forward and speak the truth.

As a reporter for *The Guilfordian*, the ironies continue to hit home. Just last academic year I was fortunate enough to write an article for *The New York Times* detailing the community spirit and togetherness which came forward during the now famous Guilford College Library Book Move. It was a story easy to write and a story easy to report; the full force of Guilford's ideals were alive and well, ready to detail on the printed page. Naturally, everyone was open and honest and hopefully my article captured some of the uniqueness of the event. Too bad I can't say the same about my most recent article on Keith and internships. Indeed, the truth ain't always pretty, and I do not think everyone is telling the truth. In fact, I'm not hearing much of anything. What really amazes me is that when the not so great side of Guilford is to be examined with the same journalistic commitment toward objectivity and fairness, the collective institution will not respond.

One of my greatest motivations as a reporter is to be able to capture the various facts and opinions which surround issues on campus. By reporting the facts and views of people at Guilford objectively

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and with accuracy, readers can develop better understandings on issues and consider the wide range of opinions which may speak to any particular issue. If I do a good job, hopefully I will provide the reader with a front row seat as facts and opinions jostle it out in the marketplace of ideas.

In the case of Jim Keith and internships, I believe there exists a rich marketplace for debate and consideration. Clearly, not everyone approved of the decision and some even point to a conspiracy, but few if any on campus, from either side of the fence, want to lay it on the line and ask the necessary questions or express their own feelings, emotions.

Thus, an opportunity is lost as key elements to a complicated and dynamic story go unreported and unexamined, and Guilford College, in my opinion, takes yet another step away from its own statement of purpose as a Quaker institution devoted to the lofty ideals of candor, integrity and the pursuit of knowledge not just in the classroom, but in all aspects of the college.