

Campus conservatives find voice

BY EMMA BURGIN

ASSISTANT STATE & NATIONAL EDITOR

Liberal students have long been the most vocal on the nation's college campuses, but conservative students — encouraged by a popular Republican president and backed by established right-wing groups — are finding their voices.

On the west coast, the University of California-Berkeley, with its reputation for liberalism,

now has more than 500 College Republicans. They were recognized for their efforts to promote the conservative voice at the College Republicans National Committee's conference in July.

Almost 3,000 miles away, a fledgling conservative group at UNC has mounted an attack on the University's freshmen summer reading book, "Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting by in America,"

by Barbara Ehrenreich.

The book, which chronicles the author's brief stints in low-wage jobs, incensed the newly formed Committee for a Better Carolina, a conservative group headed by UNC senior Michael McKnight.

McKnight's group has gained sympathy from Republican state legislators and was invited to make its case on Fox News.

UNC also made national headlines last year for its summer reading selection, "Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations."

Student led conservative activism began increasing in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and has strengthened during the war with Iraq, said McKnight, who also is chairman of the N.C. Federation of College Republicans.

"The conservative party is closely identified with patriotism," McKnight said. "The left reaction to those incidents really turned people off."

The conservative upswing since Sept. 11 isn't limited to colleges and universities. Americans handed Republicans both houses of the U.S. Congress in 2002 and support for President Bush remains strong, though his poll numbers are slipping.

McKnight asserted that the liberal attitude of "blame America first" led to increased support for conservative candidates in the 2002 midterm elections.

While more college students are registered as Democrats, the gap between those registered as Republicans is closing, according to a March 2003 study by Harvard's Institute of Politics.

The College Republicans National Committee has tripled its membership since 1999, now totaling 1,148 chapters nationwide, said David Joyslin, CRNC communications director.

A growing number of young Republicans also are creating and running conservative organizations independent of the CRNC.

Campus Leadership Program jump started 256 independent conservative student groups on campuses in more than 42 states, Field Director Jim Eltringham said.

A commonplace feature of the groups is financial support from established conservative groups.

"We applaud those organizations that proactively seek for sponsors to help them accomplish what they want to accomplish," Joyslin said.

The Committee for a Better Carolina, started by McKnight, is backed by the John William Pope Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Chapel Hill.

"(Their support) is very important to the ads we run, and it's helpful to know that influential alumni like the Papes are behind you," McKnight said.

Joey Stansbury from the Pope Foundation said the foundation is receptive to students seeking support. "It's not so much the name behind the foundation as people willing to support your financially," he said. "It's a moral boost and gives students the confidence to continue to pursue projects they're involved in."

For his part, McKnight has proved bold in his pursuits, serving as a megaphone for the conservative voice at UNC and throughout the state.

As chairman of the N.C. Federation of College Republicans, McKnight has overseen a group that has increased its membership from 500 members in August 2002 to 2,000 members to date.

McKnight said that in 2002, the N.C. College Republicans made up 80 percent of the N.C. Republican Party's "Get Out the Vote" effort.

"Our folks were out full force. We registered 2,000 voters and 2,000 absentee ballots," he said.

McKnight said he is already working to make an impact on the 2004 elections. "Our folks are out there making a very significant contribution," he said. "Election season never ends for us. When elections are over, it's time to work on campus activism."

But liberal groups on campus are up to the challenge of matching the growing conservative voice.

Dan Harrison, president of UNC's chapter of Young Democrats, said his group welcomes vigorous debate with conservative groups on campus. "They've gotten louder under McKnight," he said. "(But) we're going to continue to work hard. We do that whether or not conservatives are active."

Contact the State & National Editor at stntdesk@unc.edu.

Ehrenreich's experience harder than she expected

BY NICK PARKER

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

After UNC's nationally scrutinized Qur'an summer reading controversy, "Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America" seemed a relatively tame choice. But author Barbara Ehrenreich has caught a lot of heat in the past few months from conservative groups. Here, she answers some questions about her motivation for the book and reaction to the controversy.

What was your inspiration for embarking on this nationally acclaimed "odyssey"?

I had been writing for a long time as a journalist, writing in normal forms of journalism about issues related to women and poverty. When welfare reform came along in the mid-'90s with the assumption that a single mother would be just fine getting a job, that she would be lifted out of poverty and be able to take care of her kids with no trouble, I was sort of fascinated and infuriated by that.

As I said in the book, I was speaking with the editor of Harper's Magazine and I said, "Why don't you find someone to go out and try this: Do some of the old-fashioned kind of journalism and try it and write about it?"

I really didn't mean myself. Anyway, he said, "You should do it, Barbara," and so it started as a magazine assignment.

Do you view the work that you did as a social study or more of a snapshot?

I think it is very personal in a way. This is not a study of the working poor; there is no pretense in the book that says what happened to me is representative. How could I know that? It really is just a one-person story, and there are weaknesses to that, obviously, as opposed to a big sociological survey. But the strength of that is sort of an up-close and detailed perception.

So, in retrospect, what was the most important thing you learned?

Oh, I learned so much. I knew it would be difficult, but I figured that I could make ends meet. If I could make \$7 an hour and if I could pay \$500 or less in rent, then it would be tight, but it seemed possible. What I hadn't counted on was that rent would be much higher than that.



Author Barbara Ehrenreich was surprised that her book sparked a controversy at UNC

What do you consider surviving in America, and did you find it possible?

I think I could have done it if I could have had two jobs. I could do it, but it surely would not have been pleasurable. You can forget about movies, Internet access and of those kind of things that us middle-class people take for granted.

What do you want students to take from reading the book?

I wanted them to become aware of all these human beings around them who are driving a delivery truck and cleaning up offices and hotel rooms and serving our food — people who are often invisible to more affluent people. I wanted people to at the very least realize that there is a human being doing this, someone with a story. Someone who has sore feet or a sore back, someone not totally unlike myself.

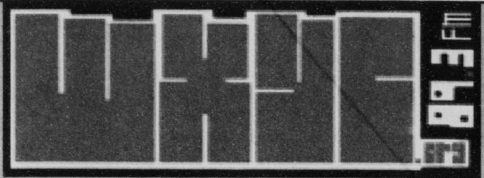
How have you reacted to the controversy here at Carolina and the criticisms by the Committee for a Better Carolina?

What struck me so much about the ad that they took out in The (Raleigh) News & Observer and the things that Michael McKnight said when we were on a few talk shows together is that they weren't saying anything about the book. He wasn't saying "this book is not true; it is slanted; it is biased; the things she observed are not true." It was pretty much an ad hominem attack on me. Communist, atheist, socialist, whatever.

Could you do the same thing now given the economic climate?

First, it would be much harder to get a job. I could pretty much walk into a job in 1998 without any experience because they needed people so much. That is a really important thing to remember about all of the hardships that I experienced in the book is: That was the best of times. I wouldn't want to do the same thing now. I don't think I could.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.



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