

# Fraternity party's theme called 'offensive, sexist'

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EASTON — A "Back to the Womb" party at a Lafayette College fraternity last weekend has generated an angry protest from students and faculty members and an investigation by college officials.

In a letter in today's edition of "The Lafayette," the student newspaper, a coalition made up mostly of female students and faculty members called the party at Delta Upsilon "extremely offensive and sexist" and demanded a public apology. The letter charges that the party was "a flagrant violation of the principles on which coeducation is based: equality and respect.

"It is especially disturbing that such a grotesque insult to women should occur just as Lafayette is celebrating its 10th anniversary of coeducation," the letter continues. "We are particularly concerned with this because it is by no means an isolated example of insensitivity and disrespect toward women at Lafayette."

In their own letter in the same issue, the fraternity members say they "regret having offended some, but we cannot apologize for a novel party that kept a capacity crowd laughing and dancing far into the night."

Herman Kissiah, dean of students, said the Saturday night party is being investigated and that the findings will be presented to the college's student-faculty committee on student conduct, which will decide what disciplinary action, if any, will be taken. Action could range from withdrawal of recognition of the fraternity chapter, social probation or a warning.

Dr. David Ellis, Lafayette president, said Thursday he did not have much information about the party. But from what he had heard, he said, he feared the event "exhibited both vulgar and degrading behavior and, if so, clearly shows a lack of understanding of responsibility and insensitivity in human relationships."

Some faculty members have urged the administration to take disciplinary action against Delta Upsilon. Edwin Clausen, an assistant professor of history who has been active in women's issues on campus, said if the fraternity is not punished, he will try to get the faculty to do something, although he doesn't know whether the faculty has that power or whether it would back him.

"The social atmosphere on this campus is sick," said Clausen, who attended the University of California. "If this had happened at

tremendous student uproar, and the fraternity would have been kicked out."

Various reports have been circulating as to exactly what went on at the party. One coed who left in disgust after a few minutes said the basement barroom was made to simulate the inside of a womb, with red tissue paper over the lights. Some of the props included a large-scale replica of a used Tampon, female breasts made of water balloons, and replicas of fetuses that had been aborted with coat hangers, she said. A sign over the bar read "Association of Lafayette Wombs," a reference to the college's women's association.

Student leaders who organized the protest acknowledged that the theme of the party was advertised in advance, that many women attended and had a good time and that the protesters do not represent all Lafayette women.

"This is not necessarily directed only at DU," said Chris Neff, co-president of the Association of Lafayette Women. "The party was just a culmination of things that have been going on for a long time. But we feel it was an insensitive gesture. They could have had a different theme or no theme at all and still had a successful party."

The letter, which was drafted Monday night at an impromptu meeting of about 25 people, reportedly was more strident in its original form, calling for disciplinary action and a boycott of the fraternity. Some students felt, however, that seeking disciplinary action would only heighten hostilities.

"The focus is on changing attitudes, not changing the status of Delta Upsilon," said Ms. Neff, who did not attend the party. She indicated Thursday the protesters still might try to organize a boycott of the fraternity.

Clausen said the women's failure to get together to seek stronger measures against the fraternity is emblematic of the social problems at Lafayette. Too many women are afraid of being ostracized by the fraternities, he said, because the frats provide virtually the only social life on campus.

The coeds involved in the protest said they are fed up with what they call the pervasive sexism they encounter at Lafayette, a sexism that usually takes more subtle forms than the "Back to the Womb" party. At fraternity parties and other social events, they contend, they are repeatedly propositioned, physically touched and verbally abused.

One of the results of this has been

have become immune to such humiliation and just accept it as the norm, said Melissa Galbraith, co-president of the women's association.

Some of the protesters said the responsibility for changing attitudes is up to the students, but others, including some faculty members, blamed the administration for fostering the sexist atmosphere. What is needed is more active leadership, not more investigations, said one faculty member.

Delta Upsilon's weekly "pub night" party, featuring free beer for all guests, was jammed Thursday night with about an equal number of male and female students. In response to the reaction to last weekend's party, the women were each handed a flower as they entered and escorted to the basement barroom by freshman pledges.

Several of the women at the party acknowledged a problem of sexism on campus exists, but said Delta Upsilon as a whole is the "least abusive" to women and should not be singled out. Some said they were offended by the theme of the party but knew the fraternity did not do it maliciously and that the protest against it has snowballed. The theme had gone over well at other schools, they said.

The sexism issue apparently has been a topic of more widespread concern at Lafayette. Women faculty members are forming an ad hoc committee on the status of women with an aim toward improving the status of both female faculty members and students, said Stacey Schlau, an assistant professor.

Ms. Schlau also said a separate committee, at the request of President Ellis, recently completed recommendations on how to handle "sexual harassment" cases, focusing mainly on the student-student and professor-student level. The administration is studying the policies at other colleges before making the guidelines official, she said.

The protest letter to the student newspaper was signed by four of the college's five sororities, the social sisters of one fraternity, a faculty women's group, a Jewish student organization and nine individual students, including four males.

Some of the coeds at Thursday's pub night said not all the members of the sororities agreed with the letter. A separate letter was submitted by the fifth sorority stressing that Delta Upsilon should not be singled out.

Delta Upsilon's letter states that the "emotional and often physical



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harassment and humiliation suffered by the Lafayette women at the hands of Lafayette men" is "ripe for open discussion and campuswide concern." The letter also concedes that "as Lafayette men, we sometimes fail to foresee that we may be contributing to the more widespread problem of feminine abuse."

The letter also notes that "the social tradition of Delta Upsilon has been, is now and ever shall be in a spirit of spontaneous, light-hearted and often eccentric hedonism . . . It was in this spirit that the party was conceived and planned (all in a span of two hours), not with the intent of aiming a degrading missile toward the ego of Lafayette women."