

Hula No More: Lu'au Called Racist

By Steven Menashi

Alpha Chi Alpha Fraternity and Delta Delta Delta Sorority are racist and ignorant, some students are saying, because of a social event they planned for last weekend.

"It has come to our attention that Alpha Chi Alpha Fraternity is having a Luau party where people are encouraged to dress up like Hawaiians," wrote Omar Rashid '00, president of Lambda Upsilon Lambda, Dartmouth's Hispanic fraternity, in a message to the Coed Fraternity Sorority Council. "Perhaps the rest of the members of the CFSC will tolerate bigotry, however, we Los Hermanos Imprecendibles [sic] de La Unidad Latina, Lambda Upsilon Lambda Fraternity Incorporated will not be a part of any organization that does not reprimand its members who engage in RACISM."

Rashid informed the CFSC that, if the Council did not penalize Alpha Chi Alpha for "this vile act of incivility," LUL would renounce its membership in the CFSC.

Aaron Akamu, President of Hokupa'a, the Hawaii Club at Dartmouth, also sent an E-mail message to the CFSC. "As a native Hawaiian," he wrote, "I am deeply offended and hurt when I heard of the party that is being planned for Friday Night." He urged "all of your organizations to take action on this issue."

The lu'au event that was to be held Friday was neither registered with the College nor publicized on campus. Rashid and Akamu learned of the party through an E-mail message that Kimberly Lenox '01, Social Chair of Delta Delta Delta, sent to members of her sorority. "[T]omorrow night sounds like a lot of fun," she wrote. "[W]e are having a luau at alpha chi."

She asked party attendees to dress up "hawaiian style" and promised "authentic hawaiian music." The message included plans for activities and drinks—"we're thinking vodka in watermelons and pineapples and stuff"—and a request that members invite several guests.

The complaints from Rashid and Akamu were sent to the CFSC at 11:28 PM and 11:48 PM, respectively. At 5:02 AM, an E-mail message was sent to the campus from Eric Kelley, Summer President of Alpha Chi Alpha, and Alexandra Sophocles, Summer President of Delta Delta Delta.

"Recently the members of AXA and DDD planned a joint social event incorporating Lu'au as a theme," they wrote. "It has come to our attention that this theme has offended members of the Dartmouth community. On behalf of AXA and DDD, we would like to apologize for any disrespect and harm our actions caused." With "hope that change will take place," the two Greek societies and Hokupa'a "will host a forum about the misuse of culture and ethnicity on campus."

The apology was swift and surprised many students, who believed that the lu'au was not racist or offensive.

"I am a native German," said Philipp Saumweber '01, Summer President of Alpha Delta Fraternity. "Since coming to Dartmouth, I have attended several events that have mimicked German cultural customs, such as the German night at Westside [Buffet] or the Oktoberfest party at Sig Ep. These events were extremely fun. I felt that people were actually making an effort to try and show others the fun aspects of German culture. I was in no way offended. I believe that the people here at Dartmouth that are com-

none of them actually are sorry for organizing this party—and right they are. No wrong was done that they could be sorry for."

In fact, the apology by Kelley and Sophocles appears to have been motivated by fear of demonization or punishment rather than by genuine remorse.

"Unfortunately on this campus when accused it seems you have to roll over otherwise you are implicated even more," said Kelley, explaining his apology.

Many students perceive an oppressive environment on campus, where non-minority students must avoid any mention of ethnic or cultural issues, especially expression of unpopular opinions, lest they be condemned as racists. Indeed, since her E-mail message was made public, Lenox has received several hostile messages accusing her of bigotry.

"I have read the supposedly offensive blitz that was sent out," said John Phinney '00, former Vice-President of the Class of 2000. "The most ethnically charged phrase that I saw was 'Hawaiian style.' This is supposed to be offensive?"

Still, students and student organizations apologize almost reflexively for speech and expressive conduct deemed offensive to minority groups—regardless of the merit of the charges.

Last November, when some students objected to a party with a "ghetto" theme, Andrew Cohen and Jill Carey, presidents of Chi Gamma Epsilon Fraternity and Alpha Xi Delta Sorority, published a public apology on behalf of their organizations: "we realize why the theme is offensive and find the campus reaction justified," they wrote—and sponsored a community forum "to address this and other recent issues of insensitivity on campus."

Writing in *The Dartmouth* January 11, Rashid condemned Sigma Phi Epsilon for sponsoring a party with a "Miami, Will Smith theme," in which participants were encouraged to dress up "like Cubans." Rashid, a member of Dartmouth's Committee on Civil Discourse, wrote that "bigots in our community have conspired to commit yet another hate crime in order to discourage potential Hispanic students from applying to our great institution and to intimidate Hispanic students already attending" the College.

As if by formula, Sig Ep officers published a letter, stating that "Diversity and understanding are cornerstones of any successful community," and explaining that their comments had been taken out of context.

AXA and Tri-Delta's apology (see facing page) followed a familiar formula: apologize, then host a community forum—never mind the merit of the accusation.

"Let's not argue about whether Hawaiians should be raising hell about this," wrote CFSC President JoJo Adofomensah '01 in a message to Greek presidents. "The fact of the matter is they are upset at what almost happened, and we have to deal with it."

Early Friday morning, CFSC Secretary Eric Etu '01 sent a message to the Greek presidents instructing them not to make any public comments about the lu'au controversy, and especially not to respond to a series of questions from *The Dartmouth Review* (see facing page). That afternoon, Etu sent another message, which included a response to the *Review's* questions that Etu had written and Adofomensah approved. "If you would like to respond [to the *Review*]," Etu wrote, "we encourage you to use this as it captures the ideals of the CFSC (and hopefully of your house as well)."

But, "if you want to use it," Etu cautioned, "leave mine and JoJo's names off of it, AND leave the CFSC out of it. The CFSC, as an organization, will not be making a public statement."

Etu's response affirmed students' charges of racism and took a strong stand against Alpha Chi Alpha and Tri-Delta: "A Lu'au is a religious ceremony, and the fact that organizations wished to use it as the theme of an alcoholic party is unacceptable," he wrote. "If this party were to happen, it would have made a mockery of both Hawaiian religion and history." Etu said that the call for disciplinary action against Alpha Chi Alpha "was completely appropriate

and action will be taken." Alpha Chi Alpha and Tri-Delta "did not act in accordance with [Dartmouth's Principle of Community], and therefore there is no question that they must and will be punished."

In addition to the punishment to be meted out by the CFSC, Etu welcomed further sanction by the College administration against Alpha Chi Alpha and Tri-Delta: "we expect that Dean Redman and Dean Larimore will also issue comments and may wish to heighten the punishment issued by the CFSC, and we support this possible intervention by the College."

Etu's comments, which Adofomensah approved, ostensibly represented "the ideals of the CFSC." Yet, the

"I'm sure many of you have been contacted by the Review (very quickly). DON'T RESPOND YET! Please blitz the CFSC account FIRST with anything you're thinking of telling the Review and let us look it over first—this is for all of our protection."

—CFSC SECRETARY ERIC ETU,
IN A MESSAGE TO CFSC MEMBERS

response was extreme and failed to evaluate the initial claim that holding a lu'au is a racist act. Many Greek presidents voiced dissatisfaction with Etu's position.

The CFSC, however, adopted the position not out of actual offense that the lu'au party was planned, but out of cowardice in the face of charges of bigotry—and a potential public relations disaster. Etu's statement wasn't what the CFSC believed, but what Etu thought the College wanted to hear.

In fact, after a meeting with Dean of the College James Larimore and Dean of Residential Life Martin Redman, at which it was established that the College did not find the lu'au objectionable, the CFSC dropped its contention that



any wrong had been done. The CFSC cancelled its emergency meeting, which had been scheduled for Sunday night. Instead, the Council released a statement—the first public comment by the CFSC about the lu'au:

"The Coed Fraternity Sorority Council deeply regrets this unfortunate incident. However, we believe that the way in which it was resolved demonstrates the type of relationship that needs to be formed among the CFS system and other students and student groups." The CFSC, apparently, applauds Alpha Chi Alpha for canceling the lu'au and for apologizing to the Dartmouth community. The Council, however, expressed no opinion on the lu'au itself, except to say that it hopes to "prevent incidents such as this from arising in the first place." The CFSC no longer plans to penalize Alpha Chi Alpha.

The Council's statement, however, fails to address what many students see as the real issue.

Students at Dartmouth "can never really be sure anymore if their actions will fall within the range of the continually expanding range of offensiveness," said Phinney. "It would seem that the answer now is simply to never act in a way that could be construed as even the tiniest bit outside the range of 'your culture.'"

Many find on campus an environment of fear and intimidation, where students are afraid to express an opinion, or sponsor an event, that addresses issues of cultural diversity, race relations, or minority politics—especially when their opinion is an unpopular one. That perception was reinforced by the CFSC this weekend, when the Council instinctively supported the protesters, and failed to defend Alpha Chi Alpha. ■

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plaining about intolerance should be a bit more tolerant themselves and try out new experiences."

"The lu'au was not offensive," said Matthew Wilkens '01. "It cannot be defined as offensive because it does not make fun of, put down, [or] belittle...any part of the Hawaiian culture." LUL's "call for disciplinary action is incredulous...Being offensive is not illegal and if the College shelters its students like this, we are going to have a rude awakening in the real world."

"AXA and DDD had no right to apologize," added Wilkens. "I have talked with members from both houses and

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