Campus responds to closing of case

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Editor Staff

After closing their investigation without arrest, Kalamazoo Police officers made statements which have implicated the student who received a hate letter and whose room caught on fire last fall. However, some Kalamazoo College administrators deny that the evidence points to the student. They say his own self-involvement would be contrary to his character.

Last week, police closed the alleged racial intimidation case which occurred on Townsend last September. An article in the Kalamazoo Gazette said investigators are "hesitant" to link the racial note to the fire, according to the article. The Gazette article also cited a Kalamazoo Police report stating that police believe the first-year student who received the threatening letter and whose room was the site of the fire, authored the letter and set the fire himself.

"I said to him, 'I believe that he had actually written the letter in an attempt to find a graceful way to leave K-College and go home,'" Kalamazoo Detective Steve Ouellet said in an Oct. 6 interview with the student involved in the article. "I told him blankly he had written the letter, and he weakly replied, 'No.'"

Kalamazoo Deputy Fire Marshall Marty Meyers said in the same article: "The black male occupant of the room had been smoking the night before in the room. Originally, he stated he wasn't smoking but after the box of cigars was shown, he stated he did smoke earlier. He refused to have any further interview with the Fire Marshall's Office to confirm any factors concerning the fire or give any statements of the fire."

Meyers ruled the fire "suspicious" and said that he "cannot find the cause of the fire," according to the article. He said, however, that the fire was consistent with fires started with smoking materials, according to the article. Associate Dean of Students Danny Sledge said that he was "the third person involved in the meeting with" the student involved in the article. Sledge added, "I understand that perspectives differ. But from my recollection there was no time when the detective said to him that he thought he was responsible." Sledge said, "What he did say was that in many hate crimes, there was some self-involvement," he added.

"He was very specific that he would not become a suspect until all possibilities of another person had been explored."
exhausted," Sedge said. "I think his seeing that adverb, "weakly," really put his own interpretation on the comment. To me, the response and demeanor were indicative of an eighteen-year-old student who had just gone through some very traumatic incidents. I would use that as the criteria for evaluating and describing his response," Sedge said.

Dr. Zadei Pickly, a First-Year Seminar professor and advisor, said the student wrote a paper for her course about the note before the fire occurred. "I'm completely convinced that he didn't write that hate note. It would be totally out of character. I think that saying he wrote it is taking the easy way out," Pickly said. "Based on what I know of him as a person, seeing him before and after and reading his papers and journals, I am positive. I think it's ridiculous. I think it's tragic that he didn't feel more at welcome here. After the fire, people did try to make him feel welcome, but before that I know he did not feel at home," she said.

The campus finally went out, but returned to finish the quarter. He did not return Winter Quarter and reportedly has transferred to another college. Vice President for Experiential Education and Dean of Students Marilyn Rilante added, "If you close a case because you have no suspects and no direction to go, it seems to me that is all you should say. It surprised me that the police made statements to the reporter other than their official closing-of-the-case statement.

"The College's position is disappointment that we didn't find the person or persons responsible for the racist letter and the fire in the student's room. If there is more information we will ask the police to reopen the case," she said.

A $4,000 reward was offered for any information regarding the hate letter and fire. The day of the fire President James F. Jones, Jr. called the campus together on the Quad to demand the activity and declare the campus united against any form of discrimination.