

September 29, 1998

Dear Parents,

As I write this, our campus community is taking steps to cope with a series of events that occurred on 27 and 28 September. The purpose of my letter is first to share with you the details of those events, and second to describe the actions our community of faculty, staff, and students have taken to address the issues raised by these events.

First I want to assure you that Kalamazoo College is a safe place for your son or daughter to learn and live. Our community is dedicated to learning and the values learning fosters--curiosity, tolerance and a sense of justice. Learning can occur only when our students feel safe, and our community will do as much as possible to provide that environment.

#### The Events

During an 18-hour period the following events occurred.

1. At approximately 2PM Sunday afternoon an anonymous hate letter was taped to the door of the residence of two new students, a first-year African American and a white junior transfer student. During orientation (the week of September 13), the African-American student, like many classmates, had participated in an open poetry reading event sponsored by the College's literary magazine. He had read an original poem, the theme of which, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., was the importance of judging an individual according to the content of his or her character rather than the color of his or her skin. The hate letter derogated this poem and its author, and using abhorrent epithets the letter advocated the elimination of all non-white students from the campus community.
2. At approximately 8AM Monday (September 28) morning, a fire occurred in the room occupied by these two students. There were no injuries; neither roommate was in the room. Firemen and police put out the fire, characterized as a slow, smoldering or non-accelerated fire by the fire marshal. In his investigation and based upon evidence available, the fire marshal classified the fire as one of "undetermined origin," but he has kept the investigation open, in large part because of the threat implicit in the hate letter. The Criminal Investigation Unit of the Kalamazoo Police has opened a separate investigation into the letter. Neither investigation has conclusively connected the fire and the letter.

## Actions (September 28)

Our first action was to comfort and ensure the well being of the two students and to contact their immediate families. Both young men are physically unharmed but understandably shaken. In fact, our entire campus is wounded by these events, and our subsequent actions were taken to address that fact.

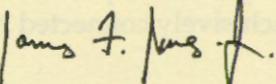
At 3PM several senior officers of the College and I listened to the concerns of our students of color at a meeting arranged by the Black Students Organization (BSO). Following that meeting, I informed the faculty of the events and our current and proposed actions to address them.

At 7PM I met with the entire campus student community to share with them the facts regarding the incidents and to outline the steps the college would undertake to address the issues raised by the incidents and to learn the identity of the perpetrators. The latter steps include a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the identification of the individual(s) responsible. During this short address, I stressed our community's strong condemnation of these cowardly acts. They were acts designed to intimidate a new citizen of our community, our African-American friends and fellow learners, and the act of self expression (reading a poem) so central to education and civic life. These acts cannot and will not stand. Following my remarks a statement on behalf of BSO was presented. It concluded, "[these events have] strengthened us as individuals and as a unified body. Our presence on this campus will remain unchanged; we will not be moved."

Students then adjourned to smaller "break-out sessions" moderated by faculty and staff to discuss these incidents and their feelings about them. Those discussions continue today and focus on concrete actions that our community will take to ensure an environment safe for learning. Many of the student suggestions focus on the importance of being with one another--through dialog and touch--during this time of shock and healing. They also call for the strength of many voices that unequivocally condemn the hatred and cowardice of these acts and extol the light of learning, tolerance, and diversity. These voices are evident today in discussions and visually in the words that students have written on signs and sidewalks.

Many of you parents have contacted me and added your voices to those of your sons and daughters that make up this diverse community of learning here. These voices will endure and will be heard. And in these voices is the greatest guarantee of a safe place to learn.

Yours sincerely,

  
James F. Jones, Jr.  
President