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• Investigation

Belanger tells story behind FirstClass threats

By Kathryn Ritchie and
Paul Livingstone
Maine Campus staff

The penalties levied by the University of Maine against a student accused of issuing a violent threat on FirstClass have been set, but an investigation by UMaine's Public Safety continues.

Casey Belanger, 19, of Caribou, has been ordered by UMaine to serve 30 hours of community service over two semesters. The university has also suspended his FirstClass account and placed him on "probated suspension." The punishment sought by the state, however, is potentially more severe.

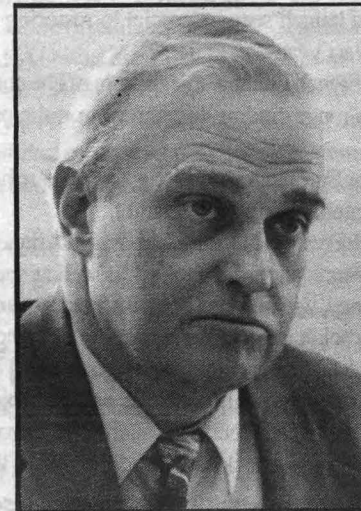
"It's a \$5,000 fine," Belanger said. "That's the only thing I'm really worried about, you know. I don't plan on doing this again."

"Basically, this case is being used as an example by the university and the state," said Ted Curtis, an attorney for Student Government's Student Legal Services.

UMaine could have come down a lot harder on Belanger, according to Curtis. Because the case involved a threat, a criminal case could have ensued.

The state civil suit filed Tuesday is seeking an injunction against Belanger restricting him from threatening any person because of their sexual orientation, race, color, religion, ancestry, sex, national origin, physical origin and physical or mental disability.

"It appears the university



Ted Curtis, Student Legal Services attorney. (Dave Gagne file photo.)

could have handled the affair using its own policies, but chose to file because statewide attention would be given to the inci-

dent," said Curtis. The probable penalties for Belanger are relatively low, he said.

FirstClass policy states that "the user shall not use the University's computing resources to harass or threaten other users."

Belanger said he is hoping to settle things soon with the Attorney General's office by agreeing to sign a deal that would waive the fine against him in exchange for admitting he violated the civil rights law.

"I'm like 'Casey the gay-basher' now," he said. "It's a huge misunderstanding. I hate the way I turned out to be the evil guy."

According to Belanger, it all started a few months ago when he started receiving e-mail messag-

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es on his FirstClass account from the address Caseyhatesfags@Rocketmail.com. Belanger said Rocketmail is an e-mail forwarding system in which someone can register their address and receive an alias. Computer users can then send and receive e-mail using the alias, giving them anonymity by withholding their real address.

Belanger said the person behind that address had obviously read his FirstClass resume. On his resume, Belanger had posted two lists, one of his likes and another of his dislikes. He said his "likes" list included snow boarding, cars and sport bikes. His "dislikes" included onions, whiners and fags. Several people had e-mailed him concerned about his dislikes and he would reply that he didn't condone homosexuals' actions.

"A lot of people took it the wrong way. I have a few friends that are homosexual," he said. "It just seems to me guys and guys just aren't meant to be together."

At first the messages sent from the Rocketmail address questioned his resume, but they began to suggest violence, Belanger said.

"As it went on, it got more to the aggressive, threatening side," he said, and added that in the messages the person had indicted that they had seen Belanger on a daily basis.

When a UMaine student read his resume and sent the message, "Who does this kid think he is?" to the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual, Religion, Politics and Debate folder, Belanger said he thought it was the person who was using the Rocketmail address.

When Belanger sent a reply to the student, he said he didn't know enough about FirstClass to know his reply would be sent to all of the other folders as well. His message was not meant to be directed to the gay community as a whole, he said, just to the student who he thought was harassing him.

Belanger said he erased the Rocketmail messages after he received them and Public Safety is currently looking into it. He said he hasn't heard from the Rocketmail address since he sent his message to the student.

Belanger said he thought the whole issued was settled on Monday, after he had met with Judicial Affairs. He was surprised when Public Safety officers woke him up the next morning to deliver the Attorney General's lawsuit.

"That was supposed to be the end of it," Belanger said.

Though he has been getting looks and hearing rumors on campus, he said the

student reaction hasn't been as bad as that of his hometown, Caribou. He said one of the "nasty rumors" floating around there is that he's shot a homosexual in the head.

Belanger said he's "pretty damned pissed" about losing his FirstClass privileges for the rest of the school year. He said Public Safety has threatened to arrest him if they see him viewing FirstClass from anyone else's computer. Belanger said he would protest the charges against him if "I wasn't afraid I'd get thrown in the slammer."

Investigator Chris Gardner, UMaine's Civil Rights Officer, said he was not surprised to see this case.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before it would happen," he said. When he came to the university nine years ago, students didn't have phones in their rooms and very few people complained of phone harassment. Once the students got the phones, the harassment picked up.

Gardner said Belanger's FirstClass post was reported to him on Friday, Oct. 17, by someone who had read it. He notified the AG's office by phone the following Monday and continued to investigate. He said new evidence came to light last Wednesday with the discovery that the text in the original phone call "wasn't the complete document" and the police weren't "aware it had been sent to as many people."

"The original document was not the same as the others had. It had been changed," Gardner said.

Even before this week's lawsuit, a series of meetings were already planned for campus groups and staff on civil rights. The dates have not been set yet.

A "probated suspension" is, in Belanger's words, like the state saying "we're watching you now." The suspension means Belanger is still a student, but only as long as he doesn't violate the injunction.

If his restraining order is approved by a judge, a violation would result in an arrest, according to Gardner. However, when the judge sees the case in the coming weeks he does not have to agree to all of the conditions of the restraining order requested by the AG.

This was the first time, to Gardner's knowledge, that a campus civil rights violation has led to a lawsuit.

"He has every right to his opinion," Garner said, but he didn't have the right to put another person in fear.

He said he has told Belanger to notify him if anyone harasses or intimidates him.

"We're here to protect his rights as much as anybody else's."