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The Maine Campus

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Students say racism a problem at UMaine

By Doug Vanderweide
Staff Writer

When the African-American Student Association met in the Bangor Lounge of the Memorial Union Monday night to discuss racism, "it was very painful," University of Maine President Dale Lick said.

"It was painful for the students and for the administrators that were present," Lick said. "We thought we had been making good progress in creating a learning environment free of racism and harassment. We found out we still have a long way to go."

About 80 black students, another 20 or so white students, and about 20 administrators gathered to hear the students discuss their experiences with racism at UMaine.

The meeting was called in reaction to an assault early Sunday morning, when two black UMaine students, Quester Hannah, 21, of

Old Town, and Aaron Phillips, 21, of York Village, were assaulted by nine white males.

However, AASA President Jammal Williamson said the meeting was not to discuss just that incident, but to discuss racism in general.

Student Rob Pauleus read a letter the Association had written to local newspapers.

"Racism is a very big problem here at the University of Maine," that letter began. "... Many people... may feel that the University is fine just as it is now. We felt likewise ourselves until this past weekend."

Williamson said, "We're not a bunch of radicals trying to change the world, we're not trying to make this into an athlete-non-athlete issue, we're not trying to make it into a black-white issue."

Phillips, who sat next to Hannah during the meeting, said, "Right now, I feel so violated, so hurt, I feel



Quester Hannah (L), Aaron Phillips react to Orono Police Chief Dan Lowe's contention that Sunday morning's incident was not racially motivated. (Photo by John Baer.)

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so bad.

"I just want to go home — a lot of people here are close friends and I love a lot of people here — a lot of things go on and people of importance know these things go on, and they're not doing anything about it," he added.

"Things escalate to this point, and it just makes you want to go home. People say they'll stand up for you and they want to help you — I don't think they mean it."

Student Donald Taylor said he believes racism will exist as long as UMaine keeps "promoting" it.

He pointed to a racial slur written on the Persian Gulf War graffiti board in the Memorial Union, which read, "kill the sand niggers."

"That is just promoting the issue of racism," Taylor said. "There's something that has to be done. It's been up there, and no one's said anything about it."

We have people who clean up the Me-

morial Union and walk right past the thing and look at it, and know it's a racial slur," Williamson said. "It's just a shame for administration and students to walk past it and no one says anything about it."

"I've seen so much bigotry and so much hatred around here, it's just a prime example that all this came out," Phillips said.

Taylor said an incident at the Memorial Gymnasium similar to the one that occurred to Hannah and Phillips happened to him a few weeks ago.

"Here you have my two friends, who got jumped by ten guys, and everybody says, 'Just don't tell anybody.' But that's just not right."

One student said he believes part of the problem is that people from Maine are not used to having minorities in their community.

Several students — including Hannah and Phillips — were visibly upset after Orono Police Chief Daniel Lowe reiterated his belief that the incident on Sunday was

not started on the basis of a racial conflict.

"How can it not be racist when somebody calls you 'nigger' to your face?" one woman asked.

"And they beat you down, and are kicking you?" another man asked.

Lowe said the reports he has seen "do not have that statement."

Some AASA members in attendance said they believe Lowe's statement was one-sided, and the fact that the investigation was not complete should have prevented him from making that statement.

Others said the media was presenting only one side of the argument.

Shortly thereafter, the media was asked to leave by Assistant Dean for Multicultural Programs Cheryl Daly, who said they were preventing people in attendance from having an open discussion.

Lick said one result of Monday's discussion is that UMaine will "try to reset what our commitment is" regarding racism.

He also said he and other administrators "are trying to make this a campus where pluralism is commonplace," but "we have not stomped out racism in America, in Maine, or Orono," and "we have to keep moving towards the ideal."

Lick said pluralism may see additional dollars for new activities, but "often, the most important things aren't done with money, but by people."

He added that UMaine will be following the investigation of Sunday's assault and "we expect (the Orono police) to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law."

Lick said UMaine will be obtaining a copy of the final report and will enforce the Student Conduct Code against those UMaine students suspected of violating it.

"The University of Maine is not a racist campus," Lick said. "There is racism at UMaine. By many people's standards, it isn't serious, but it's serious to us, enough that we're going to do something about it."