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Campus controversy

By JACK STRIPLING
 Sun staff writer

A Georgia man told "dead baby jokes" for more than an hour on the University of Florida's campus Wednesday while protesting an anti-abortion display. Then he went too far, in the view of UF administrators.

Joined by a UF student, Matthew Jones held a plastic tarp in front of an anti-abortion display, partially obstructing pictures of aborted fetuses, lynchings and acts of genocide exhibited on display behind him. Before University Police Department officers prevailed upon Jones to lower the tarp, he said he was protesting the "disgusting images" brought to UF by a group called the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform.

However gruesome it may have been to some, the exhibit was protected speech that couldn't be obstructed under UF regulations, said Beth Waltrip, director of student activities. Having played host to its fair share of controversial guests, UF is constantly walking a tightrope to protect the First Amendment, maintain order and preserve the security of its public spaces, Waltrip said.

"We have to hold everybody to the same standard," said Waltrip, who called UPD officers when Jones refused to drop his tarp. "The message in this case is irrelevant ... The issue is not what they were saying, it is the fact that they were obstructing the display."

Once a public space like UF's Plaza of the Americas is opened to one group, it then has to be opened to all, said Joseph Little, a UF law professor.

"Once you set up an area in what's been referred to as a public forum, the university cannot then ration the use of the forum based on the viewpoint of what's being said," Little said.

But there are restrictions on speech at UF, particularly for groups that bring large displays or equipment on campus, Waltrip said. The Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, for instance, complied with a request to restrict its exhibit to the plaza and stand behind steel barricades.

Counter-protestors, like Jones, are also held to certain restrictions. UF regulations state that a public function can't be disrupted, which is what Waltrip said Jones and Denise Hank, a UF student, did by hoisting a tarp in front of images of aborted fetuses. The two were welcome to protest all they wanted, however, as long as they didn't obstruct the

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DANNY GHITIS/Special to The Sun

Students protest with makeshift signs against the Genocide Awareness Project, an explicit anti-abortion exhibit on display at the Plaza of the Americas Wednesday and today.

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display, Waltrip said.

Had the two not lowered the tarp and "resisted without violence," then an arrest could have been made, said Lt. Joe Sharkey.

"We could go as far as to arrest them if we had to," Sharkey said. "But that would be the last course of action."

In years past, UF has seen public backlash for allowing speakers such as controversial filmmaker Michael Moore and a representative of the Nation of Islam onto campus.

In public areas like the plaza, the Ku Klux Klan and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals have also made waves. But as long as a student organization sponsors the event, Waltrip said, UF will allow anyone on campus.

With an open policy, however, comes the potential for problems, Waltrip said. In the weeks leading up to the Bio-Ethical Reform exhibit, UF mobilized the "Trauma Response Team." Formed in the wake of the 1990 Gainesville student murders, the group of counselors, police officers, campus ministry officials and others is designed to respond to anything from hurricanes to student deaths.

"Because of the definite potential that some people may have a very intense reaction to (the Bio-Ethical Reform exhibit), I felt the need to contact them," Waltrip said.

Waltrip distributed an e-mail to the group before the event, urging members to observe "the level of disturbance (if any) and assist students who may need someone to talk to."

So if UF officials are confident an exhibit may well offend and disturb students, why allow it at all? At an academic institution trying to promote the free exchange of ideas, an open campus is really the only option, Waltrip said.

"While it may make some people uncomfortable, I would be more uncomfortable with having one person or one office decide which events or conversations merit being held or which ones don't," she said. "It's the underlying reason why we're here."

Colleges and universities that have tried to limit speech and access have often faced the most problems. Yet speech limitations are a growing trend in higher education, according to Greg Lukianoff, who heads a group devoted to campus speech. Lukianoff is interim president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, commonly called FIRE.

The group was formed 4 years ago, and Lukianoff says they've been busy battling what he calls the "speech code movement." Speech codes are designed to limit "hate speech" at universities, but have faced legal challenges and often been shot down by the courts.

"Speech codes have actually increased in number since it became clear that they were unlawful," said Lukianoff, whose group posts a "speech code of the month" on its Web site.

Lukianoff's group has also rallied against "free speech zones," which he says are increasingly common on college and university campuses.

Mike Rollo, UF's associate vice president for student affairs, said the university has intentionally shied away from declaring specific "zones" for speech, even though the plaza has long served as the primary venue for exhibits and protests.

"I think we're more flexible than that," he said. "The schools that have had trouble with this are the ones that have tried to define what can be and where it can be."

In cases where a group wants to put on a public display, like the Bio-Ethical Reform exhibit, they are confined to a specified area. But UF is open to where that area will be, Rollo said.

It's not just protests and social activism that have the potential to offend. In Gainesville, the arts have made waves at both UF and Santa Fe Community College. In 1996, a UF student was charged with animal cruelty for using mice to make an acrylic sculpture. In 2002, SFCC was embroiled in controversy when the college's gallery displayed pictures of sexual images superimposed on pictures of Jesus.

Leslie Lambert, director of the gallery, said the episode brought forth some important lessons and even policy changes at the college. SFCC has since formed a gallery board, made up of faculty from several departments and communications staff, who review pieces before they appear in the gallery. The college also has decided that only "work that is not going to cause a disturbance" can hang outside of a designated gallery, Lambert said.

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Thus far, Lambert said the board has not rejected any works for fear that they were too controversial or potentially offensive. She concedes, however, that there is an added level of sensitivity on campus about the power of visual imagery to both please and revolt.

"I'm not saying we would do it over again," Lambert said. "But on the other hand I'm not saying that we wouldn't either."

Lambert and Waltrip both agreed that there is some value to bringing speakers and displays to campus that may challenge worldviews or even make students uncomfortable. They also agreed that groups that may be offended or troubled by an exhibit should be consulted with - in advance.

"Part of our mission," Lambert said, "is to have people move from their existing comfort zones into new things."

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