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Thursday, February 13, 2003 12:00AM EST

Shaw graduate seeks redress
A letter critical of university officials led to student's eviction from campus housing

By CINDY GEORGE, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- A Shaw University graduate evicted from her dormitory for distributing a letter critical of school officials is pursuing a claim against her alma mater.

Shaniqua N. Bizzell, 27, a student government member, was booted out of campus housing in November -- three weeks before graduation -- after handing out and reading aloud an anonymous letter critical of administrators and the Board of Trustees. Longtime professor Gale J. Isaacs, former chairwoman of the Department of Allied Health, was fired the same week after admitting she wrote the unsigned manifesto.



The letter accused President Talbert O. Shaw and trustees of fostering an "atmosphere of contention and distrust" among the faculty and staff.

Bizzell said that she found the letter outside the science building and that she had a First Amendment right to read it aloud in the busy foyer of the Gary Student Center. Later, she reproduced the letter on a library copy machine, then distributed about 60 copies to students in the cafeteria.

"As a student body leader, it was my duty to tell the students," she said. "There's a bunch of dirty business going on at Shaw."

After a meeting with Shaw, Bizzell said she was initially expelled.

In his first letter to her, Vaughan Witten, vice president for

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student affairs, wrote that "no freedoms are absolute" and that "you can't yell 'fire' in a crowded theater and claim First Amendment privileges."

The letter also said Bizzell disseminated "defamatory literature" that caused "damage to the reputation of those falsely exposed to the scurrilous accusations" and created "an unstable and disruptive element in the university's fabric." He further wrote that her sanction was reduced to eviction and limited activities on campus because she was a graduating senior with a previously clean record.

Julie Youngman, a Cary attorney representing Bizzell, appealed the decision in a four-page letter to Executive Vice President Ernest Pickens, saying her client was denied due process and that the school breached its contract with Bizzell when she was denied a room and meals. Youngman wrote that Bizzell should be reimbursed for the three weeks of room and board plus receive compensation for mental anguish.

Witten responded with a letter denying the allegations and said he could not grant any requests.

"In this case, Ms. Bizzell was pushing the student body to a point of volatile and rebellious behavior with her defamatory and misguided speech," he wrote.




Shaw declined to comment Wednesday, but university spokeswoman Regina Boone said the school's legal counsel has told Shaw officials not to comment.

Bizzell, who graduated Dec. 7 with a bachelor's degree in speech pathology and audiology and has been hired as a group home manager in Carrboro, has not filed a lawsuit. She said the experience hasn't soured her on her school.

"I cannot tell you the hurt that is in my heart, because I love Shaw University dearly."

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