

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

AIDS Peer Educators now a CU group

By Robyn Pforr

The Barnard AIDS Peer Educators (APE), blocked in December by Barnard Health Services from educating students about AIDS, has changed from Barnard to University sponsorship and will continue its activities under the auspices of Earl Hall.

Since the split between Barnard Health Services and APE, Dr. Harriet Mogul, director of health services, has set up a new AIDS peer educators group, tentatively called Students Providing and Counseling on HIV infection (SPEACH), comprised of six students who will work under her department's supervision.

Mogul said the new peer education group, SPEACH, has been in the works since September. Its six members have completed training and will begin workshops in Barnard dormitories within the next few weeks, she said.

"These are students under the auspices of health services who have no problem working with health services. The curriculum has been a joint offering from the students and health services," Mogul said.

APE, which is composed of twenty peer educators, was established in fall 1987 with help from Mogul.

APE's move to Earl Hall sponsorship ended a four-month-long dispute with Barnard Health Services over supervision of the student group. Barnard administrators claimed that APE and any group disseminating

critical medical information on campus would have to be supervised by health services in order to give workshops at Barnard.

APE members, however, demanded that they be allowed to conduct educational forums without health services supervision.

In September, Barnard Vice President and General Counsel Kathryn Rodgers imposed a moratorium on the group's activities until it agreed to health services supervision.

In response to the moratorium, the group disassociated itself from health services, becoming an independent

student group.

APE coordinator Leslie Kantor, BC '89, said Barnard would not give APE members any final say in the choice of the curriculum or educators.

"They were not willing to give us any self-determination," she said.

Rodgers, who negotiated with APE over how it would conduct its sessions, was more concerned about Barnard's authority over its student group than about the content of the forums, Kantor said.

"Although they said publicly that they were concerned about the medical information, in private sessions it was clear that this was not the case," Kantor said.

"It's never really been a question of information but of who makes final decisions and the purpose of making this kind of presentation," she said.

"As we negotiated it became clear that it was very much a control and a power issue with Dr. Mogul. She fancies herself an AIDS expert and she has a very definite personal agenda for the AIDS education. Her viewpoint is very conservative, anti-sex and judgemental."

Mogul denied that she brought her own personal agenda to the education program.

"In many ways they [APE] have really stigmatized health services among students," Mogul said.

In a December 5 letter distributed to Barnard students, Rodgers outlined the administration's view of the issues involved: "Who—student peer educators or the medical staff—will decide what medical information is to be provided to Barnard students through the College? This is not a matter of 'free speech,' nor of control of student clubs, but of Barnard's institutional responsibility for student health and well-being. It is, and must remain, the province of our medical staff."

Rodgers said APE cut short discussion too soon: "Thus far we have not had enough conversation. We have not gotten far enough to make a complete judgement."

“We never barred this group,” Rodgers said. “I don’t think there is a particular bias in the administration against this group.”

The APE group chose to break off talks with administrators in order to devote its time to its activities, said APE member Pamela Mund, BC ’89.

At one point during last semester’s negotiations, APE members submitted a petition to Rodgers containing over 1,000 signatures from students in support of APE continuing its workshops at Barnard, Mund said.

The petition endorsed APE and added: “such a moratorium. . . may be a violation of students’ first amendment right to freedom of speech. We strongly protest the silencing of students who seek to help their peers in making informed decisions about AIDS and question Barnard’s reasons for doing so.”

According to Kantor, APE currently has provisional Earl Hall status and the Earl Hall governing board will meet this Thursday to decide whether to grant them full status, which would give the group access to space in Earl Hall and University Residence Halls [URH].

“This is not a way for us to get around the moratorium, but to do AIDS education,” Kantor said. “We wanted to negotiate in good faith for as long as we could. However, in the end the negotiations became extremely unprofessional.”

Barnard President Ellen Futter did not respond to the APE’s request that a mediator be present during the negotiations. Rodgers said a mediator would have delayed the negotiations.

APE’s plans for the spring term include five consecutive sessions at Barnard Women’s Coop, an AIDS Awareness Week conducted in cooperation with Columbia University’s health education office, fundraising events co-sponsored with the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance, and information sessions in dormitories, according to Kantor.

Kantor said APE would conduct floor workshops in Barnard dormitories if asked by residence assistants, since Earl Hall groups are

permitted to conduct workshops at Barnard.

“I don’t think Barnard is ready to set a precedent of not letting a Columbia group on campus,” Kantor said.

Kantor said her group may file an anti-discrimination suit against Barnard should the administration deny University-affiliated educators access to its dormitories.

Mund said several Barnard residence assistants have expressed interest in having an APE workshop conducted on their floor. “I cannot see that we can be disallowed from coming to an R.A.’s floor if they ask us,” she said.

Three APE members who are also residence assistants in Barnard dormitories say they are considering asking APE to give a workshop on their floors.

“I am thinking of asking them on my floor. I would be acting in the role of an R.A. and not an educator,” said peer educator Paul Franklin, CC ’89, an R.A. in Hewitt Hall.

“Barnard really gets into a lot of hot water if they start preventing a University group from coming into the dorms,” he said.

APE member and R.A. Thalia Comninellis, BC '89, also said she may ask APE to conduct a workshop on her floor.

SPEACH Student Coordinator Naomi Stotland, BC '89, said she understands the administration's position.

"I don't feel that they [health services] are right-wing or homophobic," Stotland said. "I certainly don't feel that she [Mogul] is advocating making judgments about people in a workshop."

Columbia University Health Educator Mimi Adler said her office has worked closely with APE in the past and will continue to do so now that APE is a Columbia group.

"Any attempt to interfere with their efforts is negative," she said. "I am delighted that they are continuing their program. They have done critical work and should continue to do that work in their style."

Adler added that she felt Health Services could also conduct a good AIDS education program: "I feel that the more people involved in this area the better."



SPECTATOR/KIRSTEN MAGNANI

Harriet Mogul