

Ethicsville tackles tragic, but hypothetical, crisis

PSH students debate parents' responsibility for children's violent acts

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If it's time for an onslaught of finals and research papers, then it's also time for another rousing ethical debate at PSH. Continuing an exercise that has been carried out at PSH for over a decade, on the evening of April 17, over 30 members of the three Ethics 345 sections at PSH met in the Gallery Lounge for the Ethicsville Town Meeting.

Near the end of each semester, the various ethics classes meet jointly to debate a hypothetical ethical issue that has relevancy, currency and just enough controversy to keep the proponents involved and vocal. Students who participate in the meeting earn as much as ten extra credit points for their effort. Topics discussed in past town meetings have included dealing with a patient's refusal of treatment, the placement of toxic landfills or the building of mills and factories near residential areas, and the equity of capital punishment for a criminal diagnosed schizophrenic after conviction.

Ethics 345 is a required class for engineering and criminal justice majors at PSH; for other students, the course fulfills a humanities or elective requirement. Craig Haas, PSH instructor of humanities and philosophy, taught two of the ethics 345 sections this semester, while Dr. Tiffany Sutton, also an instructor of humanities and philosophy at PSH, taught the third.

Haas and Sutton collaborated on the topic for this semester's town meeting. In their classes prior to the meeting, they distributed a handout outlining the issue to be discussed and reviewed various positions that could be represented. Students then signed-up for roles that interested them or were applicable to their majors.

The topic for this semester's debate dealt with the extent of a parent's liability for crimes or misdemeanors committed by their underage children. Haas said the ethics classes have debated this topic for the past three semesters, prompted by the shooting of 14 students and one teacher at Colorado's Columbine High School two years ago. In the aftermath of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's rampage at Columbine, it was disclosed that their parents' allegedly had no idea of the boys' murderous plot, although the boys were stockpiling weapons, composing "hit lists" and detailing their plan of action on computers in their bedrooms, and building pipe

bombs in the Harris' garage.

Several victims' families in the Columbine case planned to file suit against the boys' families (along with the Littleton Police Department) for alleged negligence in not overseeing their sons' activities and possibly forestalling the disaster. The case was recently settled when the Harris and Klebold families agreed to pay millions of dollars in restitution to the affected families.

At the most recent forum on the topic at PSH, various roles included

"student/parents" who believed they should be held accountable for crimes their minor children commit, and "student/parents" holding the opposite view. Students also assumed roles as members of the police force and the clergy, educators, psychologists and lawyers, and teens voicing the pros and cons of parental liability.

A press release distributed to students as they arrived for the town meeting gave details of an incident that had supposedly occurred earlier that day at Peripatetic High School in Nichomachean, the neighboring town to Ethicsville. The use of terms in the press release that have become very familiar to students over the semester as they studied Aristotelian, Kantian and Utilitarian ethical concepts, gave the information added meaning.

In the mock scenario, a 16-year-old student was apprehended after allegedly shooting a teacher who'd confronted the student about two guns seen beneath the student's coat. The student also had a homemade pipe bomb concealed in his backpack. While the police had the shooter in custody, his parents had not been located. By the time of the Ethicsville town meeting, the wounded teacher's condition was unknown and no information was available on the boy's home or

scholastic history. Just before the meeting began, participants received a list of proposed legislation pertaining to a parent's liability in cases of homicide, larceny and misdemeanors, as well as civil liability for criminal offenses.

The Mayor of Ethicsville, Phil O'Soffie — better known around PSH as Mike Barrick, a public policy major — was "elected" a few minutes prior to the proceedings. After calling the meeting to order and briefly outlining the evening's agenda, Mayor O'Soffie (Barrett) introduced three member of the Nichomachean police force who attempted to answer the audience's questions about the day's events. Several times O'Soffie (Barrett) had to steer the meeting back on track as anxious audience members, trying to

understand a violent event that had occurred so close to their own backyards, peppered the police with questions they were unable or unwilling to answer.

For about two hours, participants in the town meeting took the dais to voice their opinions. About eight

"student/parents" felt that they should be held accountable for illegal acts perpetrated by their children, contending that parental obligation includes accepting criminal or civil liability for crimes committed by their children. They faced stiff opposition from audience members who decried the possibility of establishing parameters for adequate parental oversight of a teenagers' actions, as well as the detrimental effect on other family members if a mother or father is incarcerated for one child's actions.

One parent in the audience offered personal experience as evidence that despite a parent's vigilance, their efforts may prove useless in keeping a teen out of legal trouble. The parent concluded that a parent's willingness to try to remedy a child's inappropriate behavior should not extend to serving jail time for the child's wrongdoings.

Thirteen "student/parents" rebutted the other panel's contentions. Most claimed the impracticality of constantly

monitoring a teenager's activities and testified that parents are usually only aware of what their teenagers want them to know. Although they conceded the actions of younger children should be closely watched, the age at which parental supervision could be stopped was held to be dependent on a particular teen's maturity level.

Other groups that presented arguments included three psychologists, a member of the clergy, three educators, two lawyers and five teens representing both sides of the issue. The psychologists reminded the audience that children cannot be held to the same standard of conduct as adults because their brains are not yet fully developed, while the educators pointed out that their job today includes not only educating, but looking out for their students' emotional well-being. They noted that programs are in place in many schools to try to catch students who exhibit radical character or attitude changes. One of the lawyers pointed out that while most states do not hold parents criminally liable for their children's violent behavior, several civil cases (including Columbine) have been filed in which parents have been adjudicated monetarily liable for their children's acts. The lawyer stressed that in a court of law, it is the consensus of 12 jurors that determines whether parents have fulfilled their parental obligation to their children. The other lawyer voiced concern that the law could be carried too far.

Through the course of the deliberations, a general consensus began to emerge that the issue involved a problem of degrees and numerous circumstantial variables that created "grey areas," making it difficult to pass uniform legislation applicable to all cases.

Voting on the proposed legislation at the meeting's conclusion revealed that audience members agreed with proposed parental liability in cases of homicide and civil liability for criminal offenses, but a sweeping majority rejected the stringent liability proposed in cases of larceny.

Reactions among town meeting participants were mixed. Haas reported that at the next meeting of one of his sections, Justin "Bubba" Reed, an engineering major at PSH, asked: "Can we do that again tonight?" Connie Goddell, a PSH communications major, felt that the audience did not have enough details about the case presented "to really tie into it." She added that "each situation is different and you can't judge an action across the board; it involves too many factors."

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