

Rainbow flags, insults fly in Powelton Village

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Residents of Powelton Village vow to continue flying rainbow flags in support of their gay neighbors despite sporadic acts of violence that may be in retaliation for the flags.

Powelton Village, a neighborhood in West Philadelphia, is located near Drexel University. It has a long history of social activism.

Rainbow flags, a symbol of the gay and lesbian community, also signify support for equality, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation.

The neighborhood rainbow-flag flying program began last month after three flags flown by gay resident Kurt Conklin were stolen.

But the program has been plagued by recent acts of vandal-

ism and verbal harassment. Residents believe some Drexel students are responsible for the alleged acts.

Residents want Drexel University President Constantine Papadakis to become involved in the dispute, and to make more of an effort to control off-campus student behavior.

Papadakis did not return repeated calls for a comment.

This week, the university issued a statement denouncing negative or discriminatory acts based on sexual

orientation.

"Drexel fully cooperates with investigating authorities whenever allegations of intolerant behavior are made," said the statement. "If, following the University's investigation, it is determined that the violations have been committed by a member of the Drexel community, the matter is adjudicated through the University's judicial process ... Drexel is always open to, and welcomes, new opportunities to edu-

cate the campus community on multi-cultural issues."

Powelton resident Ed Hermance said some Drexel students have chanted "homo-homo" in front of his home, vandalized a community garden, and littered extensively throughout the neighborhood.

But Hermance and his neighbors have no intention of pulling in their flags.

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"I'm not intimidated by anyone," said resident Ruth Woods. "Some [Drexel] students think they own the neighborhood. But that's not how it works ... We do not want any racism or homophobia in our neighborhood. We don't do that here. We're going to work hard until all of these problems are eradicated."

Longtime resident Betty Bauman echoed those sentiments, even though her front porch recently was pelted with eggs.

"No, I'm not backing down [from flying the flag]," Bauman said.

Shan Holt, another flag-flyer, said the problems are complicated.

"We [Powelton residents] are everything that the culture teaches the Drexel kids to look down on," she said. "We're racially diverse, economically diverse and culturally diverse. The more middle class we become, the more some students look down on us. They wonder why we haven't moved to the suburbs yet."

The great majority of Drexel students are well-behaved and peaceful, residents stressed.

"Most of the [Drexel] students are really good kids," Bauman said. "But some of them treat Powelton residents as dirt underneath their feet."

She said Drexel students have been quick to help with spring cleanings, fall leaf-sweepings, and charitable endeavors such as staffing soup kitchens.

But some students need to learn more about city living, she said.

"Students need to be educated about alcohol, public urination, public transportation, and respect for human differences," she said. "Powelton Village has such a diversity of people. Students could learn so much from us. Drexel should be teaching its students how to be global citizens. That's the real preparation for life."

Bauman said the alleged disturbances often are related to alcohol.

Holt said Drexel should be enforcing its student-conduct and alcohol codes.

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"The university in general, and Papadakis in particular, need to proactively address the whole range of challenges, and not simply wait until something bad happens, and then deplore it," Holt said.

Holt said a sharp growth in Drexel's student enrollment is contributing to neighborhood problems.

"This expansion of the student body into Powelton essentially was unplanned, unorganized, and unsupervised," she said. "It's challenging both the university, and the neighborhood, to find positive ways to coexist."

Hermance, who owns Giovanni's Room, is supplying rainbow flags at cost to neighbors and university representatives. He said conflicts between Drexel and Powelton are long-standing and complex.

"The problem is profound," he said. "We have been telling Drexel about the drinking, the vandalism and the trash for a long time. And we have been telling the police for a long time. Why they won't do anything is beyond me."

Inspector James Tiano, the police department's liaison to the sexual- and gender-minority communities, said the problems are being addressed.

"Anything we can do, we'll do," Tiano told PGN. "We'll work with Drexel security [officials], and state liquor-enforcement authorities. Whatever laws the students are violating, we will enforce them. And I want the residents in that area to contact me if a problem arises so I'm aware of it."

Greg Regnault, co-president of Drexel's Gay and Straight Alliance, said he is concerned about the alleged behavior of some of his classmates.

"It's embarrassing to be a Drexel student, and to know that some of the other students are behaving in this way," he told PGN last week.

He said a recent campus "speak-out" on anti-gay harassment was an important first step, but it was held on short notice.

Regnault would like to see similar, better-attended meetings.

"I'd like to see meetings where the victims, and the perpetrators, are in the same room, working out their differences," he said. "I'd also like to see more non-queer students giving support."

Lazar Kleit, deputy director of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, said the commission is becoming involved in Powelton.

"Right now, we're doing an assessment as to what the situation is," Kleit said Nov. 8. "Then we'll determine what sort of intervention might be appropriate. Options include inter-group intervention, legal assistance, police involvement, and outreach to university officials."

William Gaither, a former president of Drexel University, spoke in favor of the university. Gaither, who lives in Powelton, also is flying a rainbow flag.

"I think [university officials] are doing their best, and making excellent progress," he said. "Some Drexel students come to the city with a lot of bigotry in their minds. So they act out — particularly if they have alcohol in their tummies. They do things that we wish they wouldn't do."

Gaither pointed to the recent campus "speak-out," and a lengthy statement by a Drexel official denouncing anti-gay hate crimes, as examples of the university's efforts to lessen the conflicts.

Ben Dugan, president of the

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Powelton Village Civic Association, also is optimistic that the confrontations will subside. He also is committed to flying a rainbow flag outside his residence.

"Somehow I give the university credit for understanding that these alleged incidents are hate crimes — so they [university officials] have no choice but to take the problem seriously," Dugan said. "Their students can go to jail. It's not a question of whether Drexel wants to withhold students' transcripts. They [students] can be criminally prosecuted."

Hermance said he deeply appreciated his non-gay neighbors who are flying rainbow flags, and protesting anti-gay acts in the neighborhood.

"I'm very grateful," Hermance said. "If white people had occasionally stood up for black people in the way that my neighbors have stood up for me — black, white and Asian — then this would be different country." ▼