

Online, Friday, December 12, 2008



SOUTH COUNTY INDEPENDENT

Serving Narragansett, South Kingstown,
Charlestown, Kingston, Wakefield and Peace Dale

[Home](#)

Local Headlines

[Arts & Living](#)

Students cry censorship over altered art

[Classifieds](#)

By Liz Boardman/Independent Staff Writer

[Sports](#)

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Students at South Kingstown High School are crying censorship after an art teacher removed a penis from a student sculpture last month and then allegedly discouraged the student newspaper editor from writing about the issue.

[Neighbors](#)
[News: South Kingstown](#)

For a class project this semester, Vivienne Arango created a papier-mâché sculpture of a male form for a senior-level sculpture class. Some, but not all, of her working drawings included a penis, as did the sculpture itself. During the construction phase, the teacher, Loretta Jeremiah, removed the penis, and when accounts of that incident spread, the school population became upset.

[News: Narragansett](#)
[News: Charlestown](#)
[News: South County](#)

When the school newspaper editor, Nick Mattyasovszky, approached her about the issue, Jeremiah confiscated his interview questions, according to Mattyasovszky and his adviser, and they were later returned to him by administrators.

[Opinion](#)

Arango declined to talk about the incident. Jeremiah did not respond to a request for an interview. But the matter and the potential censorship issues it invokes continue to be discussed by students and faculty. Even Principal Robert McCarthy said reaction led him to discuss a school's right to censor students as part of his Advisory classes.

[Gallery](#)
[Special Sections](#)

The incident was made public when students turned to the popular social networking site, Facebook, to vent their concerns. Laura Jackman, a student at Minnechaug Regional High School in Wilbraham, Mass., started the Facebook group. Since its inception last month, 284 people – mostly South Kingstown students and alumni – have joined.

[About Us](#)
[Subscribe](#)
[Place An Ad](#)
[Archives](#)

"It has come to my attention that recently at South Kingstown High School, Vivienne Arango constructed a nude sculpture for her art class," Jackman wrote in the group introduction. "Viv's teacher decided to take it upon herself to rip the penis off the sculpture and leave the rest of the sculpture in a rather haggard state, because she deemed the sculpture inappropriate and thought it was making her freshman class uncomfortable. . . . Viv was told she had to discontinue the project as she had envisioned it. When one of her classmates decided to write an article for the school newspaper on the incident, he was told he was not allowed to do so by the administration. So now we have two situations in which authority figures have censored a students freedom of expression . . . I have no idea what to do about this, just thought it warranted an angry Facebook group."

Principal Robert McCarthy was unaware of the Facebook group, but after he looked at it, he said it was not accurate.

"The inaccurate piece is that a student wanted to do a story for the paper and was denied," McCarthy said. "The issue was not censorship, but student and teacher communication. I am surprised it has morphed into more than that."

He could say little about the case.

"For me, this was like a disciplinary incident, and it's a privacy issue," he said, adding that the student, her parents and the teacher met last month and agreed on a course of action. He considered the issue closed.

"Well, the adults felt it was resolved," he said.

On Facebook, Arango said she would not join the protest effort, citing concerns of retribution at school, but said it was "cool" if others chose to do so.

"It will be more powerful because it's not just me who is upset, its other ppl [people]," she wrote.

"The assignment was to make a sculpture out of papier-mâché," said Bianca Picozzi, who is in the senior-level sculpture class. "Vivi made a person on all fours with a television for a head. It was meant to represent how we are vulnerable to the media, and how it takes over our whole lives."

Picozzi said Arango had not included a penis in the first sketch of the design but added it in the second.

"It wasn't large or anything, it was quite modest," Picozzi said.

Picozzi said Arango had formed the penis with newspaper and tape but had not yet papier-mâchéd it when she discovered it had been removed.

The class had not discussed nude sculptures like those of Michelangelo, Picozzi said.

"In junior year, we take humanities, which is like art history," Picozzi said. "We see all the [nude] sculptures and paintings. Everyone is exposed to it, whether they take sculpture or not."

Matthew Blessing, the student newspaper adviser, also teaches the humanities class, and confirmed it includes examples of nudity in art through the ages.

The sculpture course objectives – found on the school's Web site – include "understanding and appreciating the works of outstanding sculptors, past and present." Performance indicators include showing "proper knowledge of human anatomy in three-dimensional portraiture and figures."

McCarthy confirmed there is no written policy prohibiting the depiction of the human body in classes, but he said students are not allowed to create such forms in art class. The naked human body is depicted in art in humanities class, and in science and health classes, when the topic warrants, he said.

Mattyasovszky said Blessing suggested the story idea, and he first talked to Arango and then approached Jeremiah. As he requested an interview, he held a piece of paper with three questions on it.

"She reached for the paper and ripped it out of my hand and did not give it back. She told me I had to leave," Mattyasovszky said. "I said I would not leave until I got the paper back, and she called Administration."

He said Assistant Principal Rob Young arrived and took the paper, but it was eventually returned to Mattyasovszky. He later met with McCarthy to discuss case law surrounding student newspapers and the Rebellion's potential coverage of the matter but said the principal made no attempt to censor the story.

"[Mrs. Jeremiah] did not formally decline an interview," Mattyasovszky said, adding he hopes to speak with Jeremiah and eventually write about the issue.

"Nick is still attempting to uncover the story," Blessing said. "Bob [McCarthy] has no policy of reviewing the newspaper, and there is no written policy about that."

McCarthy also said there is no policy or protocol that spells out when a teacher can change students' work, whether in art class or any other.

"Normally, the teacher would discuss that with the department chair or the administration, or a colleague to get feedback," McCarthy said. He said there were times when such an act would be warranted.

"If it is considered disruptive to the classroom, or if there is a change of plans and no understanding of why," McCarthy said, again adding he could not discuss the particulars of this case.

He also said students who feel they have been wronged have ways to address their grievances.

"Something we have launched is to have one adult in the building that students feel comfortable talking to," McCarthy said. "Or they can talk to parents. I think students feel like they are listened to."

"If it was in class, and for class, a teacher can probably ruin a piece of artwork if they want," said Stephen Brown, executive director of the Rhode Island chapter of the

American Civil Liberties Union. "Sad is the word."

[Print this story](#)

[Email this story](#)

[Return to local index](#)

Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of scindependent.com.

Submit a Comment

We encourage your feedback and dialog, all comments will be reviewed by our Web staff before appearing on the Web site.

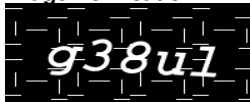
Name:

Email:

(optional)

Comments:

Image Verification:



Post Comment

[[Home](#)] [[Arts & Living](#)] [[Classifieds](#)] [[Sports](#)] [[Neighbors](#)] [[South Kingstown](#)] [[Narragansett](#)] [[Charlestown](#)] [[South County](#)] [[Opinion](#)] [[Gallery](#)] [[Special Sections](#)] [[About Us](#)] [[Subscribe](#)] [[Place An Ad](#)] [[Archives](#)]

Copyright © 2008 South County Independent. All Rights Reserved.