

# "ombudsman"

We started this column, some six months ago, more or less in response to the Board of Governors rejection of a Students' Union-backed proposal for an official Ombudsman on this campus (also supported by GFC). We accepted then the idea that if students thought they wanted an ombudsman, probably they did; and we tried, however we could, to fill that felt need. This now raises two questions: *did* students really need an ombudsman? and, if so, how well could we fill that role?

The best answers I can come up with for these questions are somewhat banal: "I don't really think I'm qualified to answer" for the first; and "probably badly" for the second.

The questions, as usual, are more complex than they might appear. Students did not get the ombudsman they wanted, but for the last several years they have had various ombudsman-like avenues of appeal open to them (Chairmen, Deans, Student's Help, Academic Grievance Boards, and the like) and this year several new ombudsmannic channels have been opened: the Student Advocate, Rape Center, and even a Dean of Students who may, someday, find time to talk to students when his administrative load lets up.

On the other hand, I never was, nor seriously pretended to be, an official ombudsman and so remained rather powerless to do anything for students beyond private counsel and public remonstrance. The demand for this type of service has not been heavy: maybe 50 students have "consulted" Kevin or I in one way or another with regard to ombudsmannic issues, and more than half of those were merely requests for one kind of information offered in one column. More than a dozen others were what you might call casual conversational contacts for which a half-hour's exploration of the issues was sufficient to resolve them. A dozen or less involved some "investigation," "fact-finding," or stirring up of arguments and people; that is, anything more than what a casual interchange with any other, reasonably well-informed faculty member might have gotten you.

That's not much business; certainly not enough to justify a full-time student ombudsman.

However, that was only a part of the audience and hopes that I had in mind for this column; there is another large non-student population on this campus whom I also hoped to address: faculty and non-academic staff.

Faculty response to the column has been, in this sense, absolutely nil. As near as I can tell, only I and those other faculty members I have mentioned in these columns, have ever been shafted by the administration or their superiors, or even students, in any way. I don't believe that of course, but, as I said, "I don't think I'm really qualified to answer." I can easily think of several reasons why faculty might not wish to share their problems with me, ranging from the fact that most of them are now the fat cats that do the shafting, to honest indifference, to spineless caution, to honest fear that I'd only make things worse. I can suggest these reasons, but I don't know, and I certainly don't know how much this non-response would change if there were a real, rather than paper, "ombudsman" available. All I do know about faculty, then, is that for better or worse, at least some of them read the column.

More surprising for me, finally, was the response from the non-academic staff, who apparently made up the largest group of the real Ombudsman's clients, back in the days when we had one. I've had two major complaints from them: both cases are still unresolved, and both are - as near as I can tell - a good deal more appalling, if not absolutely sickening, than anything I can recall happening to students or faculty.

One case involves an old man, two years away from retirement after close to 20 years on this campus as janitor, shipper and the like. Some years ago he developed a bad heart and, after taking a year of treatment for it, was returned to work with a doctor's recommendation that he be moved from shipping, a job that involved more lifting than his heart could take. Personnel began protesting that they had no place to move him: 18 months later, after appealing to the non-academic staff association, an MLA, an MP and the President of the University, he was taken off that position.

But he was then subjected to heavy pressure to go for early retirement, which would have meant a one-

third or more reduction in retirement benefits. He was moved to the gym, where the damp air aggravates his angina, and he again has doctor's advice to get out of there before he suffers more of the heart attacks that immediately developed when he was transferred there. Personnel has advised him to take early retirement, since, among the 2,000 non-academic staff positions they can find no other for which he is qualified. Human Rights intervened but could do little in the face of things like personnel's razzle-dazzle data on humidity in the gym (which is at normal levels - with the showers off, but they're on when our friend has to do the mopping) and the - apparently true - assertion that they have laid a much lower work load on him than other staff already. That may be true, but it still doesn't seem enough to do his health much good: and the name of the game now seems to be, can they crowd him into early retirement, or will they have to kill him first?

The other case involves a staffer whose annual ratings had been uniformly outstanding for several years, until apparently one of her supervisors became annoyed at the quality of her work (which, arguably, was making him look bad by comparison) and began a program of harrasment culminating in the statement - witnessed and testified to - that perhaps "they should make things so rough for her that she would either quit her job or end up in Oliver." Again, Human Rights is involved now, as well as other appeals groups, to try to fix up the most obvious damage - denial of increments and so on. But no matter what she wins at this level she, like the janitor above, will have to go on living with people who seem to have been so corrupted by the petty power they wield that it is difficult to see them as rational in the way you and I would normally use that work.

This is the kind of problem that really needs an ombudsman on this campus; unfortunately, it is hard to see where even that office could do more than patchwork good. In any case, the year is ended for the "ombudsman"; unfortunately, it hasn't ended for these non-academic staffers - and the others who haven't complained - caught in the bureaucratic mess.

dls

## BOUND COPIES!

Bound editions of the Gateway 1976-77 are available for \$15 from the SU general office. Orders should be placed with Cindi Brown (432-4236); pick-up in April.

## ON THE ROCKS

CJCA-FM Stereo 97.3 MHz  
Nitefly - 10:30 PM - 1:00 AM

**CJCA - FM**

STEREO

97.3 Mhz

## GRADUATION PORTRAITS

Annual Special Offer  
1/3 to 2/3rds off Regular Price  
JANUARY 3rd to APRIL 15th

Phone for your  
Appointment  
now.

\* Proofs are yours to keep

\* Retake or refund if you are not satisfied with your sitting

439-7284  
433-3967



**Parker & Garneau Studio**

One Location Only 8619 - 109th Street 3 blocks East of Campus

# abc festival

CBC RADIO AND THE EDMONTON SYMPHONY SOCIETY PRESENT



## THE CANADIAN BRASS

and the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra with Dr. Otto Werner Mueller, conducting.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6  
AT 8:30 P.M.  
JUBILEE AUDITORIUM

Tickets \$3.00 and \$4.00 are available at the Edmonton Symphony Box Office, 11712 - 87 Avenue and at the door.

