

Sagaris ponders FAS future

Lake Sagaris is the current Executive Officer of the Federation of Alberta Students. She was interviewed last weekend.

by Lucinda Chodan

GATEWAY: What do you see as FAS' accomplishments this year?

SAGARIS: Well, there's no question that this has been a very difficult year for FAS; however, I think we can point to some very significant accomplishments.

First of all, we have had a much improved research facility, and we've been able to provide assistance to member campuses. As well, our own presentations to members of the government have been of a much, much higher quality than ever before. Every meeting, whether it be the Students' Finance Board or the Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Affairs or the Minister of Advanced Education himself, we've had a very well-documented written brief along with our presentation. And that, I think, is a real substantial move forward because it means that we're no longer dealing in the realm of what could be, or what might be, but what is.

One quite substantial victory, I think, was the fact that the province of Alberta government scholarships were increased this year, and I think that was partly a result of FAS' efforts. We had raised the question with the government at the annual meeting of awards officers in June.

As well, the grant portion available to single parents also went up this year. I think that is definitely something FAS can take the credit for. This summer we took a look at the budget guidelines proposed by the Student Finance Board and were, quite frankly, appalled at some very, very serious underestimates. Children between the ages of zero and 11 were budgeted for half or less of what the Calgary Board of Health said they needed for a nutritious diet. We publicized that through a news conference to let students know, to let members of the public know, to let the government know that we were concerned and that we were sharing that concern with the public. We also met with the Student Finance Board, at which time we presented once again a very well-documented brief. However, the SFB, after thanking us profusely for our presentation, did not actually change anything until this most recent announcement from the minister.

We've tried to continue with the services we started to provide last year, which was the first year of our expanded staff and budget, and we've had some success there. A staffing problem, however, has meant that our fieldwork has not been as good as it could have been, which has certainly hurt us, and hurt our members.

However, the *Alberta Student Voice* has expanded its circulation and, I think, its quality. That is something we consider of absolutely prime importance, because that is our first method of contact with the ordinary student. We've received some letters and response to *Voice* articles this year and we've been generally happy with the response to the paper. I think that's an important success for FAS because that means students are more informed; they're more up-to-date with what the government is doing and get more details about what FAS is doing. It makes us more responsible to students.

Those are a few of the things we've done this year.

GATEWAY: How do you think FAS is working in relation to its member institutions? Do you think FAS accurately represents students' views on issues?

SAGARIS: Well, in terms of our relations with our members, unfortunately this year, because we haven't had a fieldworker, we haven't had a really crucial link with our members. We've had to rely on our two conferences, which were well-attended, although not as well as we would have liked.

However, there's a real need for a more direct link between the federation's executive in particular, and the membership. FAS recognizes this, and the executive now is going to be going around to campuses the week of February 18 to 22 visiting them, talking to students, sitting down and reporting on what we've been doing.

GATEWAY: Is this a response to criticisms of FAS and its structure and tactics that have come this year? What about the charge that your trip to Chile this fall was expensive and detrimental to FAS?

SAGARIS: Well, first of all, as for the trip to Chile, I think there are a lot of misconceptions about that trip. I took two weeks unpaid leave-of-absence, and my salary was used to hire someone who was amply qualified to replace me for the two weeks. FAS did not pay a penny toward that trip to Chile and has not paid a penny since.

However, I think the report that I brought back has been received with a lot of interest and a lot of concern. Chilean students and young people definitely do need our help. The universities are being run by generals, and of the approximately 2,500 cases of "disappeared" people in Chile, about 60 per cent are students. They really need the help from other countries. I think the FAS membership recognize that and have supported us. The amount of support we've got from people who before did not even know FAS existed has been very good. ... There's absolutely no excuse for arguing that Alberta students should bury their heads in the sand and ignore what's happening to our fellow students around the world.

As for responding to criticisms, I think the speaker tour is partially a response to criticism. In any organization, you want to encourage a certain amount of constructive criticism, because there's certainly no one who would argue that FAS is perfect. It's a long way from perfect; it's only five years old. It has a long way to go to become the kind of provincial student organization the students of Alberta really need. It's going to take an awful lot of work to get us where we want to be, and that means contributions, suggestions, criticisms, from anywhere and everywhere.

Consulting with students is a logical thing to do, particularly when you run into a snag, which we have — we've run into a number of snags. At the same time, I think it is important for all of us to keep in mind how lucky we are to have a provincial organization.

Students don't agree on everything — FAS knows that. We don't pretend that we all agree on everything or that we all have exactly the same political perspective, but we do say that we can agree on certain problems like access, like problems with student aid, like cutback-related problems, like quotas ...

The need for unity on those problems is great if we want to do anything. So, at the same time as we criticize and make suggestions for FAS' improvement, we have to keep in mind that FAS exists to present students' viewpoints to the government and we don't want to get so tied up in navel-gazing, to use an old expression, that we're not dealing with the real problems.

GATEWAY: What are your plans for the rest of your term as executive officer and for the 1980s?

SAGARIS: There are a number of projects we hope to have completed for the end of this year. I will be resigning, probably at the end of April, so one project is to find a good replacement for me. That's a small one of course.

There are a number of small things, including getting FAS incorporated under the Societies Act, the staff getting its first contract negotiated — all these little housekeeping things that FAS was



Lake Sagaris, FAS Executive Officer

never able to do before because of the lack of resources.

Much more important is the question of what we do with tuition fees, student aid and cutbacks. Tuition is crucial this year, because if students do not produce a unified effective response we face indexing next year. What does indexing mean? Annual tuition fee increases. Within about six years, fees at universities and colleges would double. It doesn't necessarily mean just a ten per cent increase per year, either, which is what those figures are based on. It would mean a significantly higher increase per year — that's going to really hurt access.

I think what we're really looking for this spring is a very outgoing approach; to go out to the students and talk to them about local problems as well as how they're affected by the broader issues; to go out to the community and initiate their support, to inform them of what's going on — we were very successful with that in March '78.

We also want to give our own members the opportunity to have contact with the government. Often it's the executive who met with the minister or the education caucus committee. Where possible, it's good to involve the members, so they know what kind of attitudes we face. We're looking at some kind of lobby which will involve all our members.

GATEWAY: The 1970s saw a decrease in student activism, student participation in activities ... Do you see a provincial organization of students as a viable instrument for the 1980s?

SAGARIS: I think a provincial student organization is more necessary than ever before. As far as the 1970s go, I wouldn't say there was such a decline in student activism — the focus of the activism was different, though. *The Christian Science Monitor* has described us as "more sophisticated" in the 1970s than in the 60s, and I think that's true, to a certain extent. We spent a lot of time trying to consolidate ourselves, expanding the tactics available to us. An ongoing organization can monitor government action and have more ongoing input rather than just reacting.

There are also more tactics

available to us. For example, FAS challenged the differential fees for international students in court, and we're awaiting a decision on our appeal. That kind of tactic is not possible if you don't have an ongoing organization.

There are a number of reasons why the ongoing nature of the organization is going to be extremely important in the 1980s. In the 60s we saw tremendous expansion in education, the development of the community colleges, making education more accessible to people in smaller communities, and increasing skilled labour available to industry.

This continued into the early 1970s. Around 1973, 1974, problems became more and more apparent. Problems with the loan-based student aid program, tuition fee increases ... by the end of the 70s, cutbacks were an everyday word. These trends have not been reversed, and it takes a lot more than one effort on the part of students to reverse these kinds of deep-set government policies. We need an ongoing student organization to be constantly coordinating and keeping the information flow going, to overcome the continuity problem and the high turnover rate of student leaders on campuses.

GATEWAY: Given the increasingly limited accessibility to post-secondary education, do you think there will be people willing to staff that effort? Who are concerned about accessibility? If only people who can really afford to go are at universities, will there be anyone left for FAS?

SAGARIS: Once and for all, we should lay to rest this idea that when students oppose tuition increases, they're only doing it for themselves. Yes, there are low-income students on our campuses who are most affected by tuition increases. At the same time, I don't think students are, or need to be, a bunch of selfish lumps. I think one of the purposes of a post-secondary education is to create a conscience in the individual and in society. Education is integral to any kind of social improvement.

It's up to all students to get involved. Just because your family can afford to pay \$1000 for tuition doesn't mean you can't recognize that there are other students less fortunate than you who should have a change.