Towards Building a Safer and More Inclusive Campus Climate for All: A Letter to the UMass Community
Committee for Justice for Jason Vassell - February 13th 2008

We welcome the recent (February 10th) communication to the community from Chancellors Cole and Terry. Our administrators seek to "enlist the help" of us all in protecting and enhancing our shared values of decency, justice, and civility which they correctly perceive as being threatened by a recent series of ugly and distressing incidents on our campus. The chancellors call on us to "stand together to make this campus the safe, free, environment that it should be". They are absolutely right to do so and this is a call we should and must embrace.

It is incumbent on us all to meet this challenge. We must respond quickly, thoughtfully and effectively by coming together as a community and supporting our administrators in addressing this situation and in so doing publicly reaffirm those fundamental values which unite us as UMASS. It is imperative that we do this as much for ourselves and our fellow students as for the mutual trust, respect, and loyalty implied by the term community. But how exactly can this best be done?

Of the four incidents reported in the administration message one in particular- that of our fellow student Jason Vassell- seems to demand the vigorous, informed, and responsible community involvement to which the Chancellors' message summons us.

This case demands our attention precisely because, much more so than the others, it has profound implications for the security and well being of students living in university dormitories while at the same time raising very troubling questions of the fundamental justice of the legal system. Also, the nature of the event, driven apparently by extreme bigotry, racial hostility, and a random, unprovoked rage, is particularly alarming in its sudden arbitrariness, the sick feeling that it could have happened to any one of us.

So what are the facts?

The most recent press release from the University is as follows. Bear in mind that given ongoing legal procedures the University sees itself as being "under some restraint as to what we can say…"

UMass Amherst Press Release: Man Charged with Civil Rights Violations Following Fight in UMass Amherst Residence Hall

Amherst, Mass.- A Hancock, N.H.., man will be charged for his alleged involvement in a disturbance at MacKimmie residence hall at the University of Massachusetts Amherst that occurred on Sunday, Feb. 3, UMass police report.

John Bowes, 20, is being summonsed to Eastern Hampshire District Court to face charges of disorderly conduct, civil rights violations with injury, and assault and battery to intimidate with bodily injury. Bowes, who is not a UMass Amherst student, is believed to have instigated a verbal confrontation with student Jason Vassell, 23, which resulted in Bowes being stabbed multiple times. Police say that Bowes yelled racial slurs prior to the stabbing and was involved in the altercation, which resulted in Vassell suffering a broken nose. Bowes is white, and Vassell is African American.

The incident occurred about 5 a.m. Sunday in MacKimmie, which is part of the Southwest residential area. Bowes and Jonathan Bosse, 19, of Milton, Mass., were stabbed during the fight in the building's lobby, police said. Vassell, a resident of MacKimmie, has been charged with two counts of aggravated assault and battery with a dangerous weapon (a knife) ad two counts of armed assault with intent to murder.

So what did indeed happen? Why does a member of our community find himself facing very grave criminal charges, and why does an intruder find himself wounded, in a hospital, and facing what are essentially hate crime charges? The sequence of events triggering these dismal outcomes is as follows, as best as we have been able to determine through extensive interviews with eyewitnesses.

At approximately 4am on Sunday February 3rd two young women students visited Jason Vassell a fellow resident of MacKimmie in his dormitory room. Upon entering and finding the room "stuffy" one of the young women crossed to the window and raised the shades. She was astonished to find the face of "a large white man" pressed against the window and staring back at her. Asked by Jason to explain his presence outside his window the man (John Bowes) launched into a loud tirade of racial invectives and violent threats directed at Jason. Another man was observed outside the room and he joined in the abuse. Told to go away, the man became more enraged and kicked in the window. Understandably frightened, the two young women then left the room, and the police were called.

While awaiting the arrival of the police, Jason, feeling outnumbered and at risk, called a friend from a neighboring dorm for support. When his friend arrived Jason went to the lobby and not seeing his tormenters, opened the outside door. As his friend was entering the two intruders appeared from the side and entered the lobby. The big intruder assaulted Jason and broke his nose. In the ensuing skirmish both intruders were stabbed. The cops arrived, disarmed, restrained, and handcuffed Jason. On determining what happened they released Jason from the handcuffs and allowed him to go clean himself up in the washroom. All three men were transported to Cooley Dickinson Hospital for medical attention.

Later that morning Jason's parents arrived from Boston and were taking their son back home to receive further medical

care. It occurred to the parents that there might be legal implications to taking him out of town and they did not wish him to appear to be a fugitive. Upon calling the UMass police for clarification they were told that they should bring Jason back. When they arrived at the police station he was arrested on the very serious charges outlined in the University press release. The arrest took place at approximately 2pm that day. There was thus a lapse of some nine hours between the confrontation in the dorm and Jason's arrest.

Trouble, Blues and Trouble

The above is a very brief summary of these unfortunate events which raises certain questions. And of course there are a number of victims in this. Two young women paying a casual visit to a neighbor are confronted by the kind of violent racist abuse which is alien to their experience. Even the intruder, evidently a victim of demons of irrational hatred and anger quite obviously beyond his control, will himself have grim consequences to face. The residence community finding their privacy and the security of their home violated by strangers. And then there is Jason, at one moment a student respected by all who know him, peacefully at home at his dorm, welcoming neighbors only in the next moment to suddenly find himself in grave legal jeopardy, his reputation besmirched in the public media, suspended from school and facing prison time.

Jason's reputation, both here at the university and in the Boston community where he grew up, is an exemplary one. In Amherst his peers hold him in the highest regard describing him as "gentle and compassionate", "courteous", "hardworking", and as an "honorable and principled young man." Prior to this misfortune he has had absolutely no involvement of any kind with the criminal justice system. In fact quite the opposite: his youthful record is one of social service. As a teenager Jason volunteered in an arts based youth program at a local museum. He transferred to the University from Bunker Hill Community College where he was a dedicated and highly effective tutor in the Success Program. Most recently he has worked with disabled adult men and volunteered as a mentor at a local middle school. At the University he is currently a biology major with aspirations to graduate research in medical school. Now a cloud of uncertainty hangs over those plans and aspirations.

So there are a great many questions that this community needs to address and we must immediately begin organizing ourselves to undertake that process.

When we speak of a university community and list its constituent elements we think immediately, students, faculty, staff and administration and later perhaps add the alumni. "WE WERE WE ARE UMASS". But an important, perhaps the most important constituency, is frequently never mentioned. This is, of course, the parents. The patient, proud, hard-working parents, many of whom sacrifice deeply and willingly to afford their children this opportunity.

If it is the state university's mission to provide affordable and accessible education to the people of the state then the family from which Jason comes is poster material for that mission. Immigrants from the Jamaican country side, the parents are not rich people. Mr. Wilks Vassell is a self employed electrical contractor. They are a profoundly respectable, industrious, self-respecting family that values education and is inordinately proud of their children. Mr. Vassell will tell you proudly that Jason is the third of five siblings to come through the state university system. An older sister graduated from Amherst, and another from Dartmouth. His oldest son he says with great pride is an electrical engineer who currently holds the rank of Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy. When Mr. Vassell talks about his pride in Jason his youngest, the pain, distress, and anger in his eyes and voice is palpable. "How could such a thing happen at the University?" This family evinces much respect for this university system. It will be to our everlasting credit as a community that we find appropriate ways to reciprocate this family's respect for us by reaching out to them in their hour of crisis. To that end the committee is establishing a fund so that members of this community who wish to do so may assist the family in defraying the cost of Jason's legal defense. To contribute, you may write a check to Esmie James, Mr. Vassell's mother. Check can be mailed to "Justice for Jason," PO Box 197, Amherst MA 01004.

This is but the first step. We also invite you to join with us in mobilizing our community to ensure that justice prevails in this case. Please contact justiceforjason@gmail.com or visit www.justiceforjason.org for more information or to take further action. Sincerely,

Zane Barlow Coleman, Faculty, Biology Department
Tobias I. Baskin, Faculty, Biology Department
Aaron Buford, President, Student Government Association
Jules Chametzky, Faculty, English Department
Malcolm Chu, Sec. of Diversity, Student Government Association
Dan Clawson, Faculty, Sociology Department
Laura Doyle, Faculty, English Department
Carla Dominguez, Speaker, Student Government Association
Tracy Kelley, Executive Secretary, Committee for Justice for Jason Vassell
Jeff Napolitano, President, Graduate Student Senate
Max Page, President, Massachusetts Society of Professors
Amilcar Shabazz, Chairman, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
Michael Thelwell, Professor, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
Ruth Thompson, Student Trustee