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[Memo from Michele Myers to the Community, March 12, 2004]

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SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

To: The Sarah Lawrence Community
From: Michele Myers
Re: Some reflections on Racism, Bias, and Exclusion
Date: March 12, 2004

My last letter to you was a simple announcement about the April 8 teach-in. I would like to tell you why I think the teach-in is important.

Most students, faculty, and staff at Sarah Lawrence, cherish the core values this institution stands for: free expression, respect for individual differences, the right question everything but the dignity and worth of others, a commitment to truth. It is painful when individual or collective acts (and sometimes lack of action) fall short of these ideals.

It is painful for any of us to feel excluded, barely tolerated, diminished on the basis of stereotypes, hated for things over which we have no control. It is painful to be challenged daily in subtle and not so subtle ways by those who question our right to belong here. It is painful to feel ridiculed because of the strength of our religious beliefs, or for political beliefs that do not fit the "liberal" norms of this community. It is painful to be labeled racist simply because of our color.

No one should be made to feel guilty for who they are, and I believe that the majority of students, faculty, and staff are outraged that anyone on our campus should be made to feel unsafe or unwelcome because of their identity or ethnicity.

Issues of racism, bias, bigotry, and exclusion are issues that concern us all. These issues never die, and they are alive today, here at Sarah Lawrence, in the United States, and all over the world. It is our collective responsibility to engage in talks with one another, to develop strategies, and ultimately to take action to make our campus diverse, safe and welcoming to all, and to promote ongoing real discussion about difficult issues. And not just for one day. What has been missing for too long is precisely a way to engage one another around issues of racism beyond politically correct statements meant to pacify and avoid conflict-laden conversations. If we end up avoiding these conversations because we are afraid to say the wrong thing or show insensitivity, we miss a chance to learn and understand something fundamental about our humanity. We must not let fear stop us from a real ongoing engagement with each other.

This is why I have called for a teach-in day on April 8, when we can leave behind our normal obligations and spend time engaging ourselves in conversations about these issues. I ask only that you come ready to listen, talk, take some risk, and commit yourself to continuing the process when the day is over.

I am moved by the response we are getting from faculty, students and staff and by the willingness of so many to participate in the effort. I know that as people of good will we will be honest in what we say, creative in developing personal and institutional strategies to combat racism, bias, bigotry, and exclusion at Sarah Lawrence, and committed to action.