

AVIS MEYER WILL NOT BE SILENCED

THE UNOFFICIAL ADVISER TO
SEU'S STUDENT NEWSPAPER
LOVES FREE SPEECH LIKE HE
LOVES HIS KIDS—AND HE'S GOT
A FEW CHOICE WORDS FOR
ANYONE WHO'D LIKE TO MESS
WITH EITHER OF THEM.

BY MATTHEW HALVERSON
photograph by KATHERINE BISH

EXHIBIT D



DEPENDING ON WHO YOU ARE,

the fact that Avis Meyer has tenure at Saint Louis University is either a really good thing or a really bad thing. If you're Avis Meyer, it's a really good thing, because it means you can fight the perceived injustices meted out by an overzealous administration and put an exclamation point on your argument by saying that the Reverend Lawrence Biondi has "all the class of a toilet seat"—all without fear of a pink slip. If you're Biondi, well, it's a really bad thing, because it means you have no choice but to sit back and gnash your teeth as one of your school's professors compares you to a dirty ring of porcelain in print. It's not that Meyer is drunk on his invincibility, slinging ad hominem insults just because he can. The unofficial adviser to SLU's student newspaper started speaking his mind this spring when the school's administrators attempted to make significant changes to the paper's charter and, in his words, "quelch their First Amendment rights and effectively kill the *University News* as a student voice."

It was the fiery culmination to a tense school year. About the same time last August that provost Joe Weixlmann informed the 32-year *U. News* vet that SLU would no longer allow the paper to provide Meyer with his \$1,500 annual stipend (which had come out of ad revenues and was more or less a reimbursement for the snacks he bought the staff on deadline nights), the university cut the editor's tuition remission in half. And then the whispers started: In the process of transferring to Loyola University Chicago, a former *U. News* editor learned from one of the school's admissions counselors that word of the

paper's death was spreading in the academic community. Rumors of its demise turned out to be exaggerated, but not by much: In late April, Weixlmann and vice president for student development Kent Porterfield met with the staff (but banned Meyer from the proceedings) and presented them with a new charter that proposed giving university officials the authority to elect the *U. News* editor in chief and fire him or her at will. (At the time, SLU administrators claimed they were just concerned about mistakes found in the student newspaper.)

Official adviser or not, the roly-poly journalism prof launched a campaign to retain the *U. News* staff's self-governance, asking hundreds of his ex-students who'd gone on to powerful media jobs to tell Biondi, Weixlmann and Porterfield what they could do with their new charter. It worked, and the students kept control—for the most part. But the drama didn't end there: Not long after the issue was resolved, *U. News*' incoming editor in chief got her hands on an email sent to Porterfield from a department VP not involved in the dust-up that said, simply, "Congratulations I think. How does the new charter solve Avis?"

This summer, Meyer sat down with *St. Louis Magazine* to recount the fallout from SLU's attempt to alter the charter and to make it perfectly clear what he really thinks about Biondi. And given his obsession with protecting *U. News* staffers' right to speak their minds, it probably shouldn't have come as any surprise that Meyer wasn't about to censor himself.

You were pretty vocal about this situation. I think it's unnecessary. I think it's unfair. I don't even know why they're doing this.

You even took out an ad in the *Post-Dispatch*, asking people to write in and complain. Yes, I did. It cost \$985. It was a killer. That's how strongly I felt about it.

No kidding—you called out Biondi by name. I said Biondi, Weixlmann and Porterfield were trying to take control of the paper and change it to effectively kill it as a student voice. Now, there's a wonderful, cyclical piece of justice to this: Biondi maintains that the paper needs better advising—that's aimed at me. There's an award given on campus called the Chauncey Finch Mentoring Award, and I got it [in May]. It

comes with a \$1,000 stipend, and I thought, "Man, if I could use that \$1,000 to pay for this ad, wouldn't that be justice?" But I don't think they're going to let me.

Did you catch heat from anyone for that ad? No one said a word about it. But I do know that they hired a few people to answer some of the e-mails and letters because they got something in the neighborhood of a thousand responses, and it almost crashed the system—or so I was told by somebody who works in alumni [affairs]. That really made me happy. If we'd actually crashed the system, that would have made my week.

All of those people who wrote in—do you think it accomplished anything? It accomplished something. It's hard to know for sure what, though. If [SLU's] intent was to shut the paper down completely, then we had a pretty good success.

Do you really think that's what they wanted, though—to shut it down altogether? No, they don't want to settle this. They want to control the paper. Period. It was like bargaining for a used car. They shoot for one level knowing that they'll settle for this level. We almost had to do the same thing. I think they did better in the compromise than we did because they have more power and authority.

But if the students still have the power to elect the editor and section editors, then how did you guys come out on the short end? Because until this charter was in effect, they had no input whatsoever and no way to fire anybody. And now they do.

SLU administrators have said they were just concerned by mistakes in the paper and the mixing of editorial and news content. I can pick up the *Post-Dispatch* every day and find that stuff, so of course it's going to happen in a student paper. They're learning to do it. That's why they call it a college paper.

Have you spoken directly to Biondi about this? No. I've been here 32 years, and he's been there, I think, 19, and we've had three discussions. And they were all hilarious. In '98, this same thing happened, and I was calling my alumni and they were writing letters and griping. Biondi called me and said something like, "I know what you're doing." I said, "OK." He said, "I don't think much

of it." I said, "OK." And then he said, "You know I have a Ph.D. in social psychology," or something like that. I said, "OK, I have a Ph.D. in English." And he said, "OK," and hung up. What do you make of that?

The next time I saw the guy, it was at an awards ceremony in the basement of College Church. We left early, and we walked along Grand Avenue, almost side by side. He had just had a knee operation, so I caught up to him unavoidably. We had this generic conversation for about 20 paces—"The Fox looks busy. Don't the flowers look nice?"—and then we ended up waiting at the corner for the light to change. I crossed the street to the parking lot and he was going someplace else, and to be civil, as he was stepping off the sidewalk, I said, "Watch that knee. I know those operations can be tricky." He says to me, "You're 60. Your time is coming."

And then the last time we talked was a 30-second conversation at another award ceremony, and it was because we were forced to be in the same room. I've got no power or money, so he doesn't care about me.

[Editor's note: SLU's director of media relations says Biondi has no recollection of having ever spoken to Meyer.]

You seem to revel in telling these stories. Are you maybe just out to stir things up a little? No, and this is why I think not: I've never done anything but react to what Biondi does. This is reaction. It's not action. If he leaves us the hell alone, I wouldn't have anything to say. But you're right about the degree to which I enjoy this, and here's why: Not everybody knows what a super-weasel Larry Biondi is, and I think they should know. His image is of this big builder and improver of campus, and that's absolutely true. He's done great things for campus and terrible things to people, and it's a wash, as far as I can tell.

So ... how would you describe your relationship? It's almost nonexistent, although I'm sure he sees it as the classic adversarial relationship between newspapers and people in power. I'm told, by almost every student I've known in the last 15 years, that Biondi tends to blame me for the bad coverage he gets in the *U. News*, which is really absurd. I can count on one hand the number of times in any given semester the kids come to me and say, "Should we do this?" I never tell them unless they ask. They're good, bright people.

But you were in college once. You know there's a certain amount of satisfaction to be taken from challenging the establishment. Pulling the tail of the tiger, yeah. There is some of that. And I think that any administrator knows there's some of that. But I don't think this paper has ever crossed the line with that stuff.

The university provides you the space for free. They pay for your utilities and Internet use. They should be able to throw their weight around, shouldn't they? If Monsanto had a paper published with stuff about Monsanto, I'd expect this to happen. But this is presumably a place where learning is important, where ideals are important, and principles are important, and the give-and-take of ideas is important. That's what a university is all about. To clamp down on an organization that disagrees with you and backs it up is almost immoral in a university setting.

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Why not just go independent? It's partially a money thing, and it's partially safety. We might even be able to cover the money; we have good advertising revenue coming in. But finding some place that would be safe would be a big deal. I leave at 1 in the morning. And even when I walk through Grand and Laclede, I watch over my shoulders. Someone said, "Can you imagine the furor that would be raised if we did get forced off campus and we had to get a place that we can afford and it turns out to be really crappy and something happens? How's the administration going to respond to that?"

So going into the school year, what's the mood among the staff? Everybody's apprehensive. I talked to the editor. She's apprehensive about the degree to which there will be some kind of quasi-control or input by the administration, and I told her, "Let's just see what happens."

Any chance of you inviting Larry out for some coffee to bury the hatchet? It would be fine with me. I can't imagine it happening, though. I think it's about as likely as [Iranian president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad or Muammar Qaddafi and Bush meeting.

Who are you in that analogy? [Laughs] I actually see myself as Ahmadinejad or Qaddafi. I'd let [Biondi] be George Bush—and that's a hell of a comment on Bush.

Do you think that this will be resolved in your time at the university? I hadn't thought about that. I plan to stay until this is resolved. Biondi is going to have to step down before too long. He's been there 20 years, and eventually he's going to have to go on to something else. I don't. I get to stay. Depending on what the next president is like, if he's a weasel-in-training, I'll stick around until I'm 80, or until the *U. News* is truly independent. There is a plan, vaguely in the works—I'm not behind it, but I'm part of it—trying to raise enough "offshore" money to enable the paper to have a secure place to operate from, and we'll go there of our own accord. That's not going to happen in a year. It might happen in three. We have some real big shots who are *U. News* alumni, people with really important jobs, and they have really good income, and they're going to help us set this up.

Wait—so you are thinking about going independent? We're looking into it. Whoever the next president is—and I hope Larry has a wonderful retirement, soon—the first thing we need to do is have the kids go to him and say, "How would you like to make \$500 a month? We'll rent the space from you." One of the things that Biondi and the administration have never said but they must know is this: At the *Post*, the *Pulitzers* owned everything, so they were the publishers. At SLU, they don't own everything in that office, but they do own the room that we're in. So it's not clear if they're the publisher, it's not clear that we're independent. But unlike the *Post-Dispatch*, the publisher isn't the source of news. At Saint Louis U., they are the source of news. It makes it more complicated. So we understand this. We understand why they get annoyed, but we don't make them do things that make them look silly. ●