

Women's March coverage sparks discussion (Letter & Responses)

By Brock Weir

The Shelburne Free Press's decision last week to run a front page photo of two graduates of Centre Dufferin District High School participating in the Women's March on Washington DC on Saturday, January 21, sparked a mixed reaction from the Shelburne Community.

Below, the Free Press presents a dialogue on some of the topics brought up by Shelburne natives Brandy Davis and Alessandra Schlums:

LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

Please allow me to express my utter disgust, shock, and disappointment at your astoundingly poor choice of this week's front page. I'm ashamed for you. As a fellow journalist, and Shelburnite I cannot even contemplate what went through your mind when deciding to publish such degrading, demoralizing and absolutely offensive material on the front page.

You are directly responsible for parents having to explain the entire conversation of the sign. Why you didn't have the inclination to smudge the words out is beyond me.

You have insulted the good reputation of the Town of Shelburne, CDDHS, and placed families in a precarious situation via explanation.

These are issues where journalists, media and especially reporters who are invested in their community and actually care about the quality of their work should absolutely never find themselves in a situation such as this, EVER!

Please issue a retraction, and a huge apology to the Town of Shelburne, CDDHS, to the women and girls of Shelburne, the men and young boys who never would treat a women in this manner or even jest as Donald Trump did in his own highly publicized comments.

If it was shock value you were looking for then I'd like to report to you that your effort was achieved.

It is my sincerest hope that I do not find myself so impassioned as to have to criticize a fellow media person in this manner in the future and remind you at this time that I love this town and even if you don't, please take your job seriously and exhibit better, compassionate decisions in future.

Extremely Sincerely,

Alex Sher

The Shelburne Freelancer

OUR RESPONSE

Thank you very much for your passionate feedback on our editorial decision last week. It is always nice to hear from you.

Of course, as a journalist I have to disagree with multiple points in your letter, although I sincerely appreciate the time you took to express your views.

And, in the end, that is really the entire point of what we do.

As a student of both journalism and history in the mid-2000s, my worlds often collided in having to write stories that required historical context. To that end, before so many of our valued newspapers were digitized I would have to look through stacks of musty, yellowed newsprint ? or even microfiche ? to see how our journalistic forebears covered the issues of the day.

Their coverage was honest and truthful, and what they left behind provided a valuable insight on larger world issues viewed through the prism of a smaller community.

Whether we like it or not ? and there are plenty of people around the world on both sides who are either elated or devastated by the inauguration of President Trump ? his inauguration was the biggest story in the world last week and it is incumbent upon those of us in this profession, should the opportunity arise, to highlight how such historic events are responded to and interpreted in our community.

Now, to the rest of your concerns.

In talking to numerous women who participated in Women's Marches in Toronto and Washington D.C. ? and even Indianapolis, Indiana ? on Saturday, January 21, I have the sense they see the photo as anything but ?Degrading, demoralizing and absolutely offensive.? On the contrary, the women who carried such signs with very similar messages told me they found the experiences highly empowering, particularly having the opportunity to send a message back to President Trump who used the world towards women in a way that people on both sides of the aisle agreed were most certainly ?degrading, demoralizing and absolutely offensive.?

As for being ?directly responsible for parents having to explain the entire conversation of the sign,? if that is indeed the case I will certainly take responsibility for it, hopeful that it created meaningful dialogue between generations, particularly parents who were able to teach their daughters that there are women from the Shelburne community not that far removed in age from them, who are prepared to stand up for their rights on the international stage.

If it encourages young girls of Shelburne to be brave enough to follow Alessandra and Brandy's example and fight for what they believe in, for their brothers to join them, and their parents to support them every step of the way, I would only be too proud to share in just a fraction of the responsibility ? although the true heavy lifting was done by the women ? young and old ? marching with Alessandra and Brandy last weekend.

In my view, the Town of Shelburne and CDDHS can be very proud to call these women their own and I do not believe a retraction is warranted.

Shock value is not what we were looking for; what we were looking for is to highlight the bravery of these local women taking the time out of their studies to make the trip to Washington in order to stand up and fight for the rights of their American sisters, and to spur important dialogue in the community.

Your letter affirms that such conversations are now taking place, and I thank you once again for sharing your views.

As Canadians, we might feel a few degrees removed from the eye of the storm, but we are not immune to the same sentiments taking root north of the border.

Brock Weir

Editor, Shelburne Free Press

THEIR RESPONSE:

We thank you for taking the time in reading last week's article regarding our Women's March experience, as well as sending an email expressing your entitled opinion.

We are happy that Brock has given us the opportunity to share our experience with the community in a very well-written article, and to further discuss its development.

We are disappointed to hear that last week's material has offended you. Our intention was to bring awareness to these existing (worldwide) issues and to open up conversations about what can be done to resolve them. The controversy of the story just goes to show how important it is to have these discussions.

The content of the sign is a response to the degrading comments of Donald Trump. Instead of avoiding this topic with the children in this community, we urge you to explain them, and to really teach them the meaning behind these words, as that is what should be focused on: how far we have come with achieving gender equality, and how far we still need to go.

By not acknowledging the crude statements of the US president, it shows that his behaviour is acceptable for a leader; which it is definitely not.

Additionally, the media is obliged to report events just as they are.

?Alternative facts? and untruths are unacceptable. For this reason, we praise Brock for publishing our experience just as it was. We believe that he has raised, not lowered, the reputation of Shelburne by way of investing an interest into these real-world issues.

We would like to clarify that by sharing our story to the Shelburne paper, we were not in this way suggesting that the people in the community would speak or act in the same degrading manners towards women the way Trump has been known to do.

Human rights inequality is an issue all across the globe, no matter where you happen to live. Shelburne is a wonderful community; however, it does not dismiss us from needing to remain aware of the existing racism, sexism, etc., that so many people experience.

Awareness will incite prevention.

We hope that conversations will develop into actions, and that we will all eventually be able to live in a world of true equality for all.

Sincerely,

Brandy and Alessandra