

Citizens Board of Supervisors censure Belgard

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2-24-93

SANTA CRUZ — Outraged community members showed up at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting to tell Chairman Ray Belgard they were embarrassed by his comments over a racial joke.

But when Belgard defended what he had said earlier this month about the incident, other speakers responded angrily, telling him to get some sensitivity training or resign.

"You should be above the norm," said Fernando Venegas of the county's Affirmative Action Commission. "I still hear you defending in some way (what you said)."

The incident arose two weeks ago. Jim Kelland, the aide to Second District Supervisor Walt Symons, had passed around a printed copy of a racial joke to at least two other supervisors.

In the ensuing flap, Kelland resigned. Belgard said at the time he was "not offended" by the joke. "A joke is a joke is a joke," he said.

Tuesday was the board's first meeting since Kelland's resignation.

Belgard repeated Tuesday that joke did not offend him. He cited his military service and 35 years in law enforcement and described

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some of the county's more lurid mass murders.

"Those are the things and acts that offend me," he said. "... not some words on a piece of paper."

Watsonville resident Shirley Castillo told Belgard that his memories of gore and dismembered bodies "(have) nothing to do with this issue.

"... I am very embarrassed that you are my representative to this body," said Castillo, who is a member of the county's Latino Affairs Commission. "It's no longer that good old boys can sit around cracker barrels ... Now it's good old boys sitting around the Xerox machine and making sexist and racist jokes."

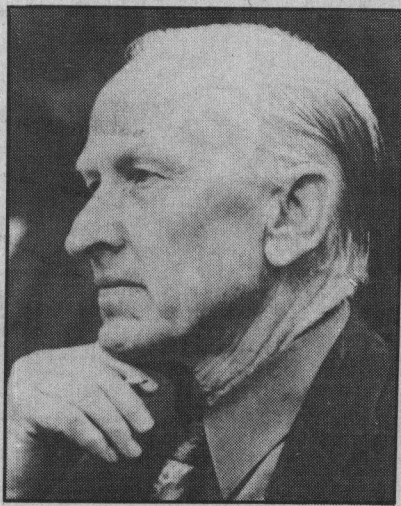
Deidre Hamilton, a former county employee, told Belgard she felt compelled to speak out as an African-American woman, despite fears that her business as a land-use consultant would suffer if she did so.

The joke was bad enough, she said, but Belgard's response that "a joke is a joke is a joke" made it worse.

"It hurt me very deeply," said Hamilton. "It was as if someone called me 'nigger' to my face, or called me 'girl' to my face."

Hamilton said she grew up in the South, and the incident brought back memories of racism and lynchings — "Things I thought here in Santa Cruz I wouldn't have to deal with anymore."

She said she was shocked someone would feel comfortable passing the joke around in the highest county offices and hoped such attitudes would not "spill over into discussions of such things as affirmative action." She urged Belgard



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Supervisor Ray Belgard said he was "not offended" by the Jim Kelland joke.

to get sensitivity training.

Belgard responded that a Sentinel reporter left out some of the information pertinent to the situation.

That information, he said, included his comment that what happened was inappropriate and that he would not have fired Kelland.

"I was asked if I was personally offended and should Mr. Kelland be fired," Belgard said. "My answer was no to both questions."

Speaking to the audience, he said, "This may not sit well with you," and added that some people were using the issue to further their own agendas.

But he said that "no one is going to find I'm racist or sexist or have any prejudice against any group of people."

Ingrid Turner, a new resident of the county, told Belgard she was

offended by his suggestion that emotional violence is not as serious as physical violence.

"Jokes hurt and harm the community," Turner said. "If you aren't concerned enough ... maybe you're not qualified to represent the community."

UC Santa Cruz student Allen Sowell told Belgard that "I have to wonder what attitudes you harbor at home if you can be this insensitive." And if Belgard does not take a look at his "antiquated mentality," he said, "the voters will re-examine you."

Meanwhile, the county's interim Affirmative Action head said Tuesday the incident underlines the need for education for board members.

"I think there are some training issues we want to look at as a county right away," said Madlyn Norman-Terrance. "I don't know what kinds of training the board members have received but we have evidence it wouldn't hurt to put the issue out there again."

She characterized Tuesday's interchange as "some initial stages of a healing process."

"Supervisor Belgard was attempting to communicate something he felt very strongly about and I believe there were members of the community trying to communicate, too," Norman-Terrance said. "... I don't know that we successfully communicated to each other. There was a lot of effort on both sides and I don't think it worked."

She conceded she was one of those who didn't fully understand what Belgard was trying to get across. But, she said, "The dialogue has started. I'm still trying to figure out what I heard and what to do about it."