

SWAMP: overcoming an image problem

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SWAMP is returning to the A&M campus.

After a one-year hiatus during which "Students Working Against Many Problems" underwent a major overhaul, the group is back, working to reduce poverty in the Bryan/College Station area.

When SWAMP started four years ago, the founding friends had no real goals, says Dave Ellis, president of the organization. If they saw an issue on campus they liked, they'd work to solve it, or at least bring it to the attention of the student body. Ellis says their main objective was to get people to laugh.

"Back when we started, A&M was narrow-minded and conservative," he says. "Any male caught wearing WillieWear on campus was considered a homosexual. We wanted to establish a new group of people. We weren't satisfied with the school's good ole' boy image, and I'm not being derogatory. Everyone fitted into a mold four years ago.

"Not only did we want to break the mold, but we wanted to get people to laugh on campus because everyone always takes school and themselves too seriously."

In order to hear the sound of laughter, SWAMP sponsored a car show one semester, Ellis says. It was an unusual show because only banged up cars could enter. The group also established the Jerry Falwell Federation of Religious Youth (FRY) with the goal of burning books.

"It was a satirical look at a serious problem," Ellis says. "The police threatened to arrest us if we burned a book on campus. That was encouraging. We also conducted a pronuclear war day when missiles were moved into Europe.

"These activities were designed to get students to understand they shouldn't feel threatened by opposing view points. Why does a student believe this particular belief? And the best way to get people to listen is through laughter."



When members of Students Working Against Many Problems (SWAMP) announced their intention of walking of the MSC grass in November of 1984, about 1,000 students showed up to prevent the group from carrying out its plan.

As the club's membership expanded, the group drew up a platform. One of their first target areas was making students aware of the need to question traditions.

The grass incident in November 1984 caused quite a stir on the campus, Ellis says. Members of SWAMP held an open forum in front of Rudder Tower in which they publicly protested against the tradition of not walking on the grass.

Ellis says they picked this particular action to point out student apathy on campus and get people thinking, not just blindly following the leader. So, they were surprised when about 1,000 students showed up to form a to prevent SWAMP from sitting on the grass.

"Now, about 1,000 people can claim they kept people from walking on the grass," he says. "Wow."

Even though Ellis sees the activity as a success, he says it's not the most significant undertaking the organization has been involved in. The group sponsored Free Speech Week a month before the grass incident. One of the groups scheduled to speak was the Gay Student Organization. During the week, Ellis says he received threatening phone calls and some members' homes were broken into.

"You just can't criticize free speech," he says, "yet some people would tell us we were trying to stir up trouble on campus. Now, how can free expression stir up trouble? If free speech can't be tolerated on a university campus, then there's definitely something wrong."

Although the free expression week was not opposed by the club members, some did oppose sitting on the grass, Ellis says.

"Hugh Stearns, a prominent club member at the time, wanted to go on the grass because he wanted to make a protest that A&M was too military and that traditions were damaging to progress," Ellis says.

"It was my belief that this might have been detrimental to the good relations we'd had so far with many students. There was no need to threaten a memorial to many people. We agreed not to go on the grass.

Ellis says the group disbanded after that.

"There was just too much bitching," he says. "We decided SWAMP would be the means to an end. And we help people get to that end."

Ed Brown II, a sophomore English major, says SWAMP used to be a scapegoat for rowdy students who had something to prove to themselves. Although he wasn't a member at the time of the grass incident, he says SWAMP may have made some students feel threatened, and they retaliated in the only way they knew how, through macho talk.

"I personally didn't see SWAMP as doing anything negative last spring," he says. "What they did wasn't wrong but some students felt it was. SWAMP just gave them something to yell about."

Brown says he knew the "bad boy" reputation the group had before he joined this year. But, he says, even if SWAMP wasn't here, people would hear what he has to say.

"I'm not radical," he says, "I still love my mother. I hate categories because they stick you in a slot and you have no chance to grow. I've learned that much in my history classes."

David Tatege, a senior marketing major, says he joined SWAMP two years ago because a friend of his decided to join. He says not everyone who joins SWAMP is a political activist.

"I don't necessarily have to make a statement through SWAMP," he says. "I didn't want to accomplish anything. I guess I joined for the hell of it."

However, some members do want to accomplish something within SWAMP's format. Yvonne DeGraw, a senior journalism major, says she joined SWAMP because she was concerned about the conservatism at A&M.

"I'm from California and I was shocked at the conservatism here," she says. "SWAMP had a booth at the MSC open house and because all the other organizations were passing out flyers, SWAMP decided to pass out their own type of flyers, census data from Chicago."

Ellis says the 30 members of the re-organized SWAMP will have to overcome the stigma of being a radical group. He says students gave them this label without knowing the club helps the community through special projects.

One community project the club is working on is the poverty problem in College Station. Ellis says there are people who live in houses with dirt floors.

"My dream goal would be to have the myriad groups on campus like Student Government, religious organizations, Black Awareness and the nutrition club get involved in this one big project," he says. "We have the resources here."

"Food drives at school are good but they don't solve the problem. We're looking for a long term solution."

Ellis says he realizes this would be a major production if he could pull it off. Two years ago the club helped establish an arts society on campus which is responsible for the free art which can be shown outside the Memorial Student Center. So, Ellis thinks this goal is just as attainable.