

What Really Happened at Wilfrid Laurier University

Inside Lindsay Shepherd's heroic, insulting, brave, destructive, possibly naive fight for free speech

Aaron Hutchins

Maclean's Magazine

12 December 2017

<http://www.macleans.ca/lindsay-shepherd-wilfrid-laurier/>

Lindsay Shepherd wishes she had written her speech last night. She simply didn't have the time or the energy. Not that she does now.

It's a Friday afternoon in late November and Shepherd is sitting at Wilf's, a campus restaurant at Wilfrid Laurier University. She wants a salad, but then she looks at the clock. She has a half hour until the start of a free speech rally organized by local university young Conservatives, where she's the feature speaker and only a single paragraph written down for her speech so far. She'll have to skip this meal. She's been doing that a lot lately.

She grabs her pen and starts writing about the state of free speech on university campuses and about the experience of being labelled a transphobe. Meanwhile, a crowd starts to grow a short walk away by Veterans' Green Park, across the street from Laurier's main campus entrance in Waterloo, Ont. They're being handed signs that read "I stand with Lindsay #freespeech."

They're gathering here because of Shepherd: the teaching assistant who showed her class of first-year undergrads a short video clip featuring controversial University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson as part of a debate from a public broadcasting show; the self-described leftist who opened up a discussion on the use of gendered pronouns, without picking sides herself; the grad student who through tears stood up to her supervisor and two other Laurier staff members who reprimanded her for potentially breaking the law by showing those video clips neutrally and without offering context; the free speech advocate who leaked the audio of that meeting to the press, opening up the university to criticism of stifling free speech on

campus; the Laurier newcomer who got an apology from both a professor and the university president; and, now, the social media star with [more than 30,000 Twitter followers](#).

But then there are also those gathering across the street for a counter demonstration. They aren't diametrically opposed to free speech. Rather, "the discourse of freedom of speech, is being used to cover over the underlying reality of transphobia that is so deeply ingrained in our contemporary political context," the Rainbow Centre, a campus group that supports the LGBTQ community, [wrote on its Facebook page](#) days prior. As such, the counter-protesters hold placards around their shirts that read "Trans People Deserve Justice." Many of them keep their faces covered under a scarf. It's understandable if they have legitimate safety concerns. One need only look at the Facebook page for the Rainbow Centre and see the uptick in hate messages in recent weeks to realize threats to their safety exist.

Shepherd finds herself at the epicenter of a debate that has erupted at universities, in online chatrooms and newspaper editorials across the continent; where Laurier has been pulled into disrepute and its academics brought to the edge of paranoia. Shepherd is between two movements, one of transgender people speaking up for their rights and another of right-wing free speech protectionists fighting against political correctness on school campuses.

Shepherd, meanwhile, is a vegetarian, pro-choice, universal health-care supporting environmentalist and ardent supporter of free speech. Her critics have been called her everything from transphobic to a hero of the alt-right—two labels she rejects.

But she's no longer fully in control of her own narrative. With minutes until it's time to leave the restaurant for the rally, Shepherd rehearses her opening line: "I never thought we would get to a point in society where showing a clip from *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* in a classroom would end up as an international news story and scandal."

There was no TV in the Shepherd home growing up. Her mother wouldn't allow it until Lindsay was about 12, and even then they got rid of it after a couple years.

"I don't subscribe to the wasteful consumerist culture that we live in and I didn't want my children to watch all the advertising," says Jennifer Shepherd, Lindsay's mom and a school teacher in Coquitlam, B.C. "And there's all this crap on TV. I didn't want her watching stuff I thought was going to be a waste of her time. I'm open to whether that was the right decision or not because there's a cultural aspect to television."

Instead, most of Lindsay's spare time was spent reading, everything from *Archie* comics to Christopher Hitchens. At the dinner table, the family discussed "things like biological determinism versus free will," Jennifer says. "Or gender roles and whether they're constructed or not. Or the benefits of organized religion. I've tried to guide her to see things from all different perspectives and I've tried not to lead her in any one direction."

One thing her mother worried about was her daughter's confidence—that is, until Lindsay reached university. When Lindsay moved away to study at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., she was a member of the school's recreation centre, helped with the student union elections committee, and worked at a local gelato shop. She jumped at the opportunity to help with nearly every public recycling event that came to the Vancouver area. She also volunteered for Terry Beech, the Liberal MP for Burnaby North-Seymour. All this while learning Farsi, her boyfriend's native tongue, so she could join in the conversation with his Iranian parents.

When she accepted an offer to do her masters at Wilfrid Laurier University, it was in part because the program on cultural analysis and social theory sounded unique, but also because she'd get the chance to live in Ontario.

On the last day hanging out with her boyfriend before moving to Ontario for school, the two didn't have much time to relax. Not when she needed to clean out her entire place and make sure every single container was recycled.

“We had to wash it, clean it, and recycle it,” says Mahdi Ghodsi. “She walked 30 minutes with heavy bags full of bottles just to make sure she could recycle them properly.”

At one point, Ghodsi threw out the suggestion that, in the interest of saving time and getting to hang out a bit more together—and just this once—they throw everything in the garbage. Shepherd rejected the idea outright. “She’s very principled,” he says. “If there’s something she doesn’t believe in, she won’t do it no matter what the cost.”

Months before Shepherd set foot on Laurier’s campus in September, the school was already under fire regarding free speech. In March 2017, Toronto lawyer Danielle Robitaille was scheduled to give a talk for criminology students at the school’s Brantford, Ont. campus. Robitaille was part of the team that successfully defended former CBC personality Jian Ghomeshi in his sexual assault trial. There were protests and Robitaille cancelled out of safety concerns. Protestors called it a victory, arguing that the event would further harm victims of sexual violence. Others claimed it was an erosion of free speech.

This is not a new issue on campuses. Earlier this year in Toronto, protesters drowned out a scheduled talk by Rebel Media personality Ezra Levant at Ryerson University. Critics said the students were shutting down free speech. Ironically, the campus Conservative group that scheduled the event also reportedly refused entry to a reporter from the school paper.

At Dalhousie University over the summer, Masuma Khan, a member of the student council executive, helped pass a motion that the union not engage in any Canada 150 celebration calling it an act of colonialism. A student wrote an op-ed criticizing the decision, to which Khan wrote on Facebook “white fragility can kiss my ass. Your white tears aren’t sacred, this land is.” The university at one point said a Senate Discipline Committee would consider the matter due to “unwelcome or persistent conduct that the student knows, or ought to reasonably know, would cause another person to feel demeaned, intimidated or harassed.” Days later, the school withdrew the complaint against Khan.

Politicians have weighed in in too, such as federal Conservative leader Andrew Scheer's campaign promise to deny federal funding to universities that don't allow free debate.

South of the border, amid racial tensions on the University of Missouri campus two years ago, both the school's president and chancellor resigned. When a journalist showed up to document the subsequent rally on public grounds, protesters demanded a "safe space" away from reporters. One assistant professor of mass media went as far to tell the reporter he wasn't allowed take any footage, tried try to grab his camera and—when unsuccessful—shouted for anyone to provide "muscle" to help get him out of there. The video of students and faculty opposing the press went viral. The professor was fired, in part for interfering with media, but also for encouraging physical intimidation of a student.

Then in September 2017, mass protests erupted on the University of California, Berkeley when former Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos spoke on campus, albeit only a few words before he was reportedly whisked away to safety by police.

Shepherd was by no means a controversial media figure when she first arrived at Laurier. All she had was the attention of a first-year class of undergrads, gathered for a 50-minute tutorial on grammar.

Laurier TAs mostly had autonomy in deciding lesson plans to make things interesting. On Nov. 1, just as she does before most of her tutorials, Shepherd called her boyfriend in Vancouver to discuss her idea for class that day.

"She talked about how English has gender and others, like my language, Farsi, is a genderless language," Ghodsi says. "She was going to bring up how this [discussion] would not be an issue if English was also genderless. And how gender should maybe not be part of the language." There was also a debate on the public broadcaster TVOntario (TVO) where they talked about pronoun usage. He told her that he'd be interested to sit in that class.

Josh Leibold did sit in her class—Shepherd’s first of three that day. “We were talking about language and how the way you speak influences society,” says Leibold. “She was trying to make the point that it influences people a great deal.”

Then Shepherd prepped a year-old clip from the Ontario public broadcasting show *The Agenda*, where [the discussion centred around genders, rights and freedom of speech](#). “Before she showed anything, she stated: ‘I’m just going to show this for the purposes of discussion. I’m not going to choose a side,’” Leibold remembers.

The first clip, which runs less than two minutes, starts at the 4:45 mark when Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, is asked what he finds so offensive about Bill C-16, the proposed legislation (later passed in Parliament) that added gender expression and identity to grounds for discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act.

“One, I was being asked—as everyone is—to use a certain set of words that I think are the constructions of people who have a political ideology that I don’t believe in and I also regard as dangerous,” Peterson says.

And what are those words? “Those are the made-up words that people now describe as gender neutral. To me they’re an attempt to control language in a direction that isn’t happening organically...but by force,” Peterson continues. “And I don’t like these made-up words ‘zie’ and ‘zher’.”

Paikin interjects: “They aren’t all ‘made up words.’ For example, ‘they’ is one of them. To speak to an individual as ‘they.’”

Peterson counters: “Right. But we can’t dispense between the distinction between singular and plural... It’s not a tenable solution and that’s the best of the solutions.”

The second clip, almost three minutes long, starts more than 49 minutes into the segment when Paikin speaks with Nicholas Matte, a historian who teaches in the Sexual Diversity Studies program at the University of Toronto.

“When someone is attacking you on a basis that is personal and that you can’t change about yourself, that is political,” Matte says. “Sometimes

[people] become politicized when they realize that no matter what they do in the world, there will be people who will continue to attack them on racist grounds, on gender and sexual violence grounds, and that's why people start to fight back and that's why people object."

When Peterson interjects saying this is about attempts to regulate his language use, Matte responds: "I don't care about your language use. I care about the safety of people being harmed. [...] I want people to be aware that trans and gender diverse communities—and especially people of colour—are being targeted and threatened physically. Free speech is a great idea and equality is a great idea, but we can't have those conversations when people are not able to be present."

Okay, class. Any thoughts?

Leibold isn't sure if the complaint to the professor about Shepherd opening up this discussion came from someone in his tutorial, but if it did, he says he wouldn't be surprised. He remembers four students as most vocal. Two were speaking out against Peterson, while the other two were standing up for Peterson's point of view. Leibold was one of the four.

"Tensions were obviously rising," Leibold says. "I don't agree with Peterson's views, but because I felt the majority of the class—without Lindsay telling them—were going to automatically disregard what Peterson said, I tried to say 'well, he has good rationale but his premises are flawed.' I was trying to present his argument in the best light while being rational about it."

At one point, one student very much in support of Peterson "was implying that trans people wouldn't necessarily be the people to look to for intelligence on the matter," Leibold remembers. "I don't think he was intending to be malicious. I just think that's how it came off in the room."

Others saw it differently. "This video had absolutely nothing to do with what we were learning that day and it felt as if she showed the video to purposely start a discussion about something she had opinions on," an unnamed student from her class [told Her Campus](#), an online magazine on women's issues at universities and colleges. "The video was showed and she asked

the class for some of their thoughts. Some of the comments made for an interesting discussion, but mostly students used it as an excuse to make fun of trans identities.”

As for Shepherd, she called her boyfriend to say she thought everything went well and that the students were really engaged. Neither knew one student from the class would soon contact the Rainbow Centre, the campus LGBTQ support community, to complain about the discussion. Toby Finlay, an administrator at the Rainbow Centre, wouldn’t share the specifics of the conversation due to confidentiality reasons, but adds: “It was through us that they made the complaint that led to the situation that blew up in the media.”

Toby Finlay uses “they/them” pronouns. Grammatically speaking, that means students coming to the Rainbow Centre will chat with them. (Not “him” or “her.”) Finlay is trans and non-binary, a term used when one’s gender identity is neither male nor female. So is Milas Hewson, a fellow member of the Rainbow Centre, who also uses they/them pronouns.

It’s been a hard month for both at the Rainbow Centre, a service within the school’s diversity and equity office that supports education and advocacy for queer and trans students. “Students have come to us feeling complicated, upset and invalidated,” Hewson says. “With these young students struggling to figure out how they’re experiencing gender, to be told in a classroom that that’s not valid has a very deep impact because it’s an issue that strikes close to home for these people.”

And even if Shepherd tried to remain neutral in the classroom, Finlay challenges the idea of neutrality in this case, saying it’s wrong “that these are issues of debate and trans students’ identities or experiences are up for conversation—in the sense that their reality is up for conversation.”

Hewson talks about being confronted in school hallways “by people I barely know asking me to justify myself and my positions.” By speaking with media, Finlay and Hewson have become the public faces for the Laurier trans community. “That also in a huge way makes me feel fairly unsafe on campus because I don’t know who might recognize me and approach me out of

nowhere and have something violent to say or do," Hewson says. "I feel generally uncomfortable on campus."

Neither Finlay nor Hewson is opposed to freedom of speech. However, Finlay says, "we think the ways freedom of speech discourse is being taken up is really functioning to cover over a lot of the transphobia that's at the core of this issue. It's being used to justify a lot of hate that's directed towards trans people."

Kira Williams experiences something transphobic every day. Some days that's harassment. Other days it's sexual assault. "The reality is Dr. Peterson's speech is targeted at trans people," says the Laurier PhD student. "And the reality is that when people like Peterson speak, it has consequences in the real world—consequences I have to live through every day."

Williams also wrote an open letter to Laurier's president, Deborah MacLatchy, saying trans people deserve an apology from her and Nathan Rambukkana, the communications studies professor and Shepherd's TA supervisor, for failing to acknowledge trans-related violence in either of their apology letters to Shepherd.

Days later, and unrelated to the events at Laurier University, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered an apology to LGBT Canadians in Parliament for the country's "historical injustice" and "systematic oppression and rejection."

Trans adults are 22 times more likely to attempt suicide than the general public, according to a 2017 study from the University of Saskatchewan and Dalhousie University, published in the journal *Transgender Health*. Trans people are also 14 times more likely to have thoughts of suicide.

A sign hangs in their window of the Rainbow Centre at Laurier: "Trans people deserve an apology." It remains there because members feel trans voices have been silenced throughout this entire conversation.

The email came just before 5:30pm on Nov. 7. Shepherd's supervisor, Nathan Rambukkana, asked if she could come in for a meeting the next day

at 2:30pm in his office where the head of her program, Herbert Pimlott, and someone for the diversity and equity office who would also be in attendance.

Rambukkana said there were concerns about the content of her tutorial. In the signature of his email was a quote from the French philosopher Michel Foucault: "We have to be there at the birth of ideas, the bursting outward of their force: not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggles carried on around ideas, for or against them."

Shepherd figured it must relate to the TVO clip she'd played in class, especially given that a member of the diversity and equity office would be in attendance. She spoke with her mom back in B.C., who told her it might be a good idea to record the conversation.

Shepherd agreed, and was greeted at the meeting by Rambukkana, Pimlott and Adria Joel, the acting manager for gendered violence prevention and support at Laurier. (All three either declined to speak or did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this story.)

Shepherd pulled out her laptop—the one with the stickers all over it saying "I voted," "I (heart) wild places," and "I speak up for animals." Rambukkana asked if she knew why she was asked to come in. Shepherd replied that she thinks it's because she showed a debate clip that had Jordan Peterson in it. Rambukkana confirmed that's why she was there.

Shepherd put her finger down on her laptop, an audio application open, and hit the record button. "As if I was taking notes," she says. Shepherd was the only one who knew the session was being recorded.

In the discussion, which has been widely posted, debated and shared online, Rambukkana explains that there was a complaint and that playing the TVO clip and opening up discussion about it could be seen threatening. Shepherd replies that she doesn't see how it could be threatening. Challenging? Yes. "But for me that's the spirit of the university is challenging ideas you already have," she replies.

Shepherd explains the situation. Her class was talking about pronouns, gendered language and using "they" as a singular. She decided to show the

TVO debate without picking a side—and then opened it up for class discussion.

When Rambukkana brings up the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and suggests Shepherd created an unsafe learning environment, she starts to cry. “I’m sorry I’m crying,” she says. “I’m stressed out because this to me is so wrong, so wrong.”

Shepherd asks who she’s targeted in all this. Joel tells her “trans folks.”

“By telling them ideas that are really out there? Telling them that? By telling them? Really?” Shepherd asks.

“It’s not just telling them. In legitimizing this as a valid perspective...,” Rambukkana starts, before Shepherd cuts in, saying: “In a university, all perspectives are valid.”

Rambukkana replies: “That’s not necessarily true, Lindsay.”

Rambukkana talks about Peterson’s popularity among the alt-right community, and at one point says that playing a clip of the University of Toronto professor, without giving any context for the students, “is like neutrally playing a speech by Hitler.”

When the 40-minute exchange was done, Shepherd called her boyfriend. “She told me the meeting didn’t go well and I knew she wasn’t going to accept what people tell her,” Ghodsi says. “The next day she said ‘I’m going to take this to the media.’” Her reasoning: if the faculty wouldn’t understand her position, maybe media could add external pressure.

She says she emailed her situation to a national paper, a local paper and a newspaper on the west coast. A *National Post* columnist got back to her right away.

On Nov. 10, the *Post* published a [story](#) about what went down in that meeting. The online headline read: “Thought police strike again as Wilfrid Laurier grad student is chastised for showing Jordan Peterson video.” As the story gained national attention, Shepherd released the audio to multiple media outlets so everyone could hear what happened in that room.

Rambukkana issued an apology letter. So too did the university's president, Deborah MacLatchy. "What happened to Ms. Shepherd in that meeting was shameful," MacLatchy says in an interview. "Most people would agree that material shown on TVO can be shown in a university classroom. The expectation is that a leader of a class has the skills and experience to present any point of view with the necessary academic underpinnings."

Over the next week, every major newspaper in the country had opinion-editorials offering every possible take on Shepherd's case. Shepherd said the apologies didn't go far enough in addressing free speech on campus.

Faculty at Laurier took sides. "We really see free speech as being under threat here," says William McNally, an associate professor of finance. "I see this thing quite black and white. A university has to encourage free expression. How can it continue in its mission without free speech? On our crest, it says *Veritas Omnia Vincit*, which means "truth conquers all." But how can truth win a battle if one side can't compete—if one side gets censored?"

McNally helped launch a petition that encouraged the school to take a strong position defending free speech. When he circulated amongst his colleagues to sign, however, he says only about 50 per cent of them said they would.

Greg Bird saw that petition, but he didn't sign. The associate professor in the cultural analysis and social theory department signed a different petition, this one calling on the school to establish safety measures for students and faculty being targeted and harassed, as well as issue a statement that transphobia and targeting of people based on their gender identity and expression will be monitored and reported.

"We don't live in a society where people should be free to speak hatred," Bird says. "Some of the freedoms we have, have to be limited to ensure the protection of all of our members—especially the most marginalized groups in our societies."

As faculty picked sides, Shepherd was readying herself to face her students for the first time since she went public—and she was hoping to open up the class with a talk about, well, everything that was going on.

The chair of the department of communications, Peter Urquhart, showed up at her tutorial that day to address the class. Shepherd remembers he opened by acknowledging the situation and while he couldn't go into specifics because of confidentiality reasons, he told the students if they needed emotional or mental support, they should feel welcome to go to the campus wellness centre. He then asked if anyone had questions—they didn't—and sat at the back of the room for the rest of the tutorial.

"The problem I had with it was he was shutting down the conversation right away," Shepherd says. "He was making it so that we could not actually talk about what was going on."

"When asked via email if he would like to comment on the record about his appearance in class that day, Urquhart declined. But then added: "Anyway, I assume she recorded them – why not ask her for the recording?" A second email, unprompted, came soon afterwards: "Sorry, you're a pro— I should have assumed that you've already heard that particular recording."

Debates over free speech can have the ironic effect of silencing a lot of people. Among Laurier's communications studies faculty, many aren't willing to talk about what's happening on campus. At least not on the record with the media.

When reached by phone by *Maclean's*, Rambukkana immediately hung up. Via email he said he was advised by his union not to speak with reporters. After he declined to comment, *Maclean's* was contacted by several communications studies students and faculty.

(In a follow up email, Rambukkana writes: "I did not contact any students to suggest that they speak to you, or any members of the media, regarding this issue. After you had been in contact with some students and colleagues, some students spoke to me about their contact with you." He did, however, forward the media request on to colleagues, who in turn forwarded the

request to students. Several faculty members and students reached out and asked to comment via questions over email and under the condition of anonymity—both requests were denied and interviews never took place.)

Those who do speak are being extra careful with their words. In a telephone interview with *Maclean's*, Laurier student Vivek Ramesh answers questions as voices in the background—who are never named—can be heard whispering responses to him.

In a follow-up interview the next day, there are no whisperers in the background, but Ramesh's criticism of Shepherd remains. "If we do anything as TAs to alienate any students, we've failed in our job as a TA and our duties in these entry-level communications courses," he says. "We're there to help to level the playing field in terms of writing. We're not there to generate controversial discussion and do any deep-dive critical thinking. That's what upper-year courses are for."

Ramesh says the larger issue is a lack of guidance for TAs from professors. "In order to generate interest—because grammar is a boring topic—[other TAs] were doing things like dissecting celebrity tweets and fixing the grammar and structure," he says. "The kind of content [Shepherd] brought in was definitely inappropriate. [...] At no point should your discussion devolve into should gender fluid and trans people's identity come into question."

Rambukkana could have handled the meeting with Shepherd better, even his own colleagues will acknowledge. "But his small mistake has now resulted in constant death threats, threats of violence and his name being dragged through the mud," says Jonathan Finn, the former chair of the department of communication studies at Laurier. "No one deserves that."

Finn worries about Shepherd advocating for secretly recording meetings with professors, as she did on Twitter, and how she handed it to the media at the first sign of transgression. "This is about free speech, but it's completely shut down free speech on campus," he says. "Campus is quiet. People are scared. People are not coming in."

Even the day of the free speech rally Finn was advised by colleagues not to come to campus. The Rainbow Centre was getting constant threats. So were some faculty. The day prior, the campus newspaper *The Cord*—whose cover story was of Lindsay Shepherd making national headlines, and featured a letter to the editor from Toby Finlay talking about how debates of the validity of trans people create an unsafe campus environment—were ripped at multiple newsstands.

“There was some message written on papers,” says Kurtis Rideout, *The Cord*’s editor-in-chief. He declined to say what was written, citing an investigation, but said there’s video of one person methodically ripping up the papers and the messages made no mention of Shepherd but instead appeared possibly related to an article in the previous week’s paper.

But no one knew that at the time so Finn stayed home the day of the free speech rally. “We weren’t sure what was going to happen.”

Shepherd looks out of place. It’s Nov. 24 and while she’s dressed like any other student on campus, wearing a toque and scarf, carrying her backpack and water bottle, next to her are a handful of students—all male—wearing their very best suits. They are young Conservatives from Laurier and the University of Waterloo. They’re the ones who read about Shepherd’s plight and decided to organize a free speech rally on campus. Of course, they invited Shepherd.

They talk about the speaker list for the rally, featuring themselves and a local Conservative MPP. They say they are acting in a non-partisan capacity today, inviting people from all political ideologies to join, but are quick to point out their disappointment that young Liberals declined their invitation to be on the speakers’ list.

“There is this misconception that free speech is a conservative issue, but that’s not the case,” says Alexander Eyre, president of the University of Waterloo Conservatives. “It’s just that conservatives are arguing for free speech because it’s often them getting censored.”

A reporter asks if they extended the invitation to the Rainbow Centre. They say they didn't, due to lack of time. Shepherd tells them they should have.

The men chat amongst themselves. If the Rainbow Centre gets an invite now—and accepts—would they give them an opportunity to speak at the microphone? Some say yes. Others say they have to consider that there are plenty of speakers already and a schedule to stick to. Shepherd says she'll direct a tweet at the Rainbow Centre, cordially inviting them to join everyone at the rally.

"For me the worst-case scenario, is there's any counter protest that gets violent," says Anton Abaev, a Laurier student who helped organize the free speech rally.

He says the best-case scenario is the school adopts the so-called Chicago Principles of Free Speech, a guideline from the University of Chicago, that states "it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive."

The group walks to the university president's office with a paper in hand, asking the school to adopt the Chicago Principles, but President Deborah MacLatchy isn't in; a colleague politely receives the letter on her behalf.

The young men now must head out and finalize details of the rally. Get the signs. Get the microphone. Practice their speeches.

Shepherd still has to write hers.

Jordan Peterson talks about having spent decades educating his students about the Holocaust. "I'm really interested in how people degenerate psychologically and ethically to the point where they can take part in an atrocity," the University of Toronto professor says in an interview. "It's basically been my life's work. And then to be accused of being Hitler, it's so absurd that you couldn't make it up."

He's talking about Rambukkana, who in a meeting with Shepherd said playing a clip of Peterson in a classroom setting—without giving students any prior context—is akin to listening to Hitler speak without prior context.

As the Shepherd story gained traction in the media, Peterson read as columnists “said that my views were abhorrent,” he says, “including two in *Maclean’s* that were most egregious.”

Those contentious views regarding the use of gender pronouns are explained in a YouTube video Peterson posted in 2016 about the Ontario Human Rights Commissions’ definition of gender identity as “each person’s internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person’s sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum.”

“I don’t know what neither means because I don’t know what the options are if you’re not a man or a woman,” Peterson says in the video. “It’s not obvious to me how you could be both because those are, by definition, binary categories. There’s an idea that there’s a gender spectrum by I don’t think that’s a valid idea. I don’t think there’s any evidence for it.” He goes on to claim it’s binary because there are two biological forms of sex, and for someone to say that gender is independent from one’s biological sex is “a proposition, not a fact.”

Peterson has steadfastly refused to use non-gendered pronouns, be it “they,” “ze” or “hir.” “I don’t recognize another person’s right to determine what pronouns I use to address them,” he adds in his YouTube clip. “I won’t do it.”

As such, his critics—notably those in the trans community— have argued that by virtue of him refusing to address them by their pronouns, he not only refusing to acknowledge their existence as trans people, but is also claiming their identity is up for debate. “I think some of Peterson’s complaints around trans folks and pronouns definitely verge towards hate speech,” says Finlay, from Laurier’s Rainbow Centre. “That’s hard for a lot of people to understand right now.”

Peterson, meanwhile, has mixed feelings about the current saga of Lindsay Shepherd. For starters, he’s sad. “It’s terrible that this sort of thing is happening,” he says in an interview. “I could say I told you so—because I did when I made my warning videos about Bill C-16. I could see that this

sort of thing was inevitable, but also built right into the legislation. There's no being happy about that."

He knew Shepherd's story was coming, though. She contacted him via email to tell him about her meeting with Laurier faculty—and her taking it to the media—because it was Peterson's polarizing views that got her into the scenario. He suggested that she check the legality of recording the meeting surreptitiously, before she released it to the press. (Recording a conversation is legal as long as one party in the conversation knows it's being recorded.)

And while Shepherd, in the leaked audio, says she doesn't share Peterson's views on this issue, that doesn't matter to him. "People can think whatever they want," he says. "I don't expect or desire for her agreement. She's a free agent. And I don't think of this as one team against the other."

It wasn't supposed to be a silent protest. They were initially hoping to be amongst the crowd of free speech demonstrators—that is until a last second change of plans. "We were informed there would be other folks attending the freedom-of-speech side, including fascists who had been violent in other demonstrations," says Finlay, from Laurier's Rainbow Centre.

The group of several dozen went to their back-up plan: a silent protest to visually represent the silencing of trans voices. Finlay and Hewson were chosen to be spokespeople for those who want to talk to them about what their counter-protest is all about. The rest of them are silent, carrying signs that read "Trans people deserve justice."

"People are forced to see there's another side to this issue," Finlay says.

Across the street, a crowd of free speech proponents grows. They carry signs that read "I stand with Lindsay" or "Everyone you meet knows something you don't." One sign says "I (heart) free speech and trans people." Another, with a picture of Jordan Peterson, reads: "This man is your friend. He fights for freedom."

Alex McEwin, a second-year undergrad at the University of Waterloo, holds a sign that says: "This tranny loves free speech." "People should not be

assumed to be transphobic by trying to open debate," he says. "The reason we have things like Pride is because we have freedom of speech and freedom of expression. You have to believe in freedom of speech if you attend Pride every year. At least, that's my opinion. People can disagree with me."

McEwin is standing towards the back of the crowd. He says he's afraid to be out there holding this sign and that his own queer and trans community will be angry at him when they see pictures of him at the rally. But he feels this needs to be said. "I think that queer and trans people should not be assumed to be part of any specific belief. We should be allowed to have our own opinions as individuals."

When the speeches are over, some from the free speech rally wander across the street to talk to the counter-protesters.

"I've never heard someone vocally go out and be anti-trans," one young man says to his friend, as they stand in front of the group of silent protesters. "It's always come down to talks of coerced speech and what I'm allowed and not allowed to say."

"So you've never heard anyone say 'f-k trans people?'" the other replies. "I've never heard that either." He then looks over at the signs—"Trans people deserve justice"—and gets very close to the group and points at the top word: trans. "I look at these signs and I would say 'people deserve justice,'" he continues. He explains that it's like the slogan "black lives matter." He thinks it should be "all lives matter."

"Maybe don't overstate the hate people have because I don't think it's there—not anywhere near the extent that you view things," says the first. "In any case, I'm going to go drink gin. Thanks for at least listening to me." The men walk off together.

The rally ends without a punch thrown.

As counter-protesters leave as a group, Shepherd waits patiently as fans—mostly young men—queue up for a chance to exchange a few words with her, and maybe take a selfie. When a Rebel Media reporter tries to jump in

with an interview, Shepherd cuts him off. She says there have been others standing patiently for a long time, and perhaps he can wait.

When the line of fans comes to an end, Shepherd is ready to go. She's been talking and listening for more than an hour. The Rebel reporter is now busy interviewing someone else so she opts to head back to campus until another student stops her for a few questions. The Rebel reporter catches up, almost missing his interview, and Shepherd answers his questions.

"Should I have turned them down?" Shepherd asks after she walks back to campus. "It's not like they can skew what I said. I sound very reasonable with what I said. It's not like I'm saying 'Down with trans!' I'm not saying that." All the while, Shepherd is coordinating an Uber ride to Toronto in mere minutes so she can appear that evening on CBC's *The National*.

Shepherd talks to every media outlet that asks her.

But when the Rebel posts its interview from the rally with Shepherd, four days after the fact—none of her answers skewed—Shepherd begins to hear the criticism, even disappointment. She spoke with a far-right news outlet.

Such criticism has grown with some of Shepherd's comments on Twitter, from thanking former Rebel Media personality Faith Goldy for her coverage at the Laurier counter-protest, to Shepherd explaining perhaps she's getting more support than Khan, the Dalhousie student, regarding free speech "because I didn't make contemptuous and insolent comments about 'white tears' and 'white fragility.'"

Shepherd's mother, meanwhile, stresses that neither she nor her daughter "are in any way alt-right," she says. "Lindsay does not want to be associated with them in any way. She's uncomfortable having their support."

So where does the university go from here? Depends on who you ask.

The Rainbow Centre continues to demand an apology from President MacLatchy for refusing to acknowledge the existence of transphobia on campus. They also want more safety measures installed at diversity and equity office buildings, such as a panic button and reinforced glass, and—among other asks—the school to hire a trans person of colour full-time as a

counsellor within the diversity and equity office to offer mental health support for students.

The free speech proponents, meanwhile, have redoubled demands that the administration adopt the Chicago Principles.

As Laurier University deals with the threats of losing donations from alumni or parents dissuading their children from even applying to Laurier, the school announced a task force that will offer recommendations to preserve free speech while respecting human rights legislation. "Our approach to freedom of expression and academic freedom does not include intolerance and it does not include hate," President MacLatchy says.

Lindsay Shepherd, meanwhile, now has a high-profile lawyer while Laurier undergoes a third-party fact-finding mission regarding her Nov. 1 tutorial and the aftermath, though what comes from that review will be kept confidential. She doubts she'll ever see a copy of it, even if she'll be the principal subject. "They'll think I'll release it to the media," she says.

It's early December and a professor in one of Shepherd's courses asks her to put away her laptop. She tells Shepherd she doesn't want to be recorded. Shepherd says she isn't. This could be a glimpse of her future—one where she feels alienated.

Shepherd has talked about what happens when she enters the working world, if this suspicion could follow her. Which workplace wants to hire someone known to secretly record superiors?

At the same time, she's become a bit of a celebrity. Some suggest she'll inevitably open a Patreon account, where followers will give her donations to keep speaking up for free speech, but she's dismissed any such suggestion. She's already turned down offers for crowdfunding, saying this is about principle, not money.

What she knows now is she wants to continue her schooling. "I want to get a master's degree. I like my brain being challenged," she says.

She's just not sure that degree will come from Laurier.