

Instant celebrity a bumpy ride for Shepherd

OPINION

Luisa D'Amato

Waterloo Region Record

2 December 2017

<https://www.therecord.com/opinion-story/7975915-d-amato-instant-celebrity-a-bumpy-ride-for-shepherd/>

Lindsay Shepherd speaks to the media after a rally organized by Laurier students in support of freedom of expression, on Friday, Nov. 24. - Mathew McCarthy, Record staff
Lindsay Shepherd worries about different things now.

In a few days, she has gone from being an ordinary graduate student into the centre of a raging national debate on free speech.

The past two weeks have been the busiest in her life. She has been so focused on getting her message out, and handling attacks on social media, that she has been neglecting her academic work.

She had a paper due the other day but "I just didn't do it," she said. "It was completely impossible."

Instead, she spends her time on tasks like researching whether the radio station that just asked for an interview is too right-wing for her to agree to it. She joined Twitter two weeks ago and already has nearly 21,000 followers. You can find her at @NewWorldHominin.

Shepherd, 22, teaches a language class at Wilfrid Laurier University. A month ago she showed the first-year students a television clip showing both sides of the debate about gender-neutral language.

Someone complained, and Shepherd was called into a meeting with two professors and a university official, who reprimanded her.

She was in tears at times, as they accused her of creating a "toxic" environment in the classroom for some transgender and "non-binary" students who prefer to be called by "ze" or "they" instead of "he" or "she."

Her presentation was "like neutrally playing a speech by Hitler," her supervising professor, Nathan Rambukkana said. He suggested she might not keep her teaching job.

Shepherd recorded the discussion, and later made it public. Canadians were outraged by the way she was treated.

Shepherd sees herself as someone with left-wing views. She noticed right away, with concern, that it was the right-wing media and groups who supported her most.

By contrast, many in the left were hostile. She was called names like "F***ing racist" and "bigoted transphobe."

Shepherd thinks some have crossed the line into libel. A graduate student from York University, Aadita Chaudhury, wrote an essay accusing Shepherd of "cozying up to contemporary white nationalists." Chaudhury also suggested Shepherd had mobilized "historically rooted theatrics of white tears" to counteract Rambukkana, "an untenured professor of colour."

On the other side, one of Canada's most right-wing media outlets, Rebel Media, was out in full force at a free-speech rally near campus a week ago. Shepherd keeps her distance. "They asked me if I wanted to do crowdfunding, with them, which I don't," she said.

She has allies, too. One lawyer offered to donate to her favourite charity, the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

And a well-meaning commenter on social media suggested she should get more professional-looking clothes instead of the casual student garb and knit hats she favours.

But Shepherd doesn't have time to think about clothes. "It's just who I am," she said.

She can barely find time to eat. After the free-speech rally Nov. 24, she "was kind of shaking" because she'd been too preoccupied to eat beforehand.

She was worried about that, because a reporter from Maclean's magazine was following her around to do a profile and was asking her about her eating and sleeping habits. "I'm worried about them calling me unstable or shaky," she said.

If that happened it would be a shame, because she is nothing of the kind. Given the intense pressure she is under, she is extraordinarily calm and resolute.

Shepherd is from British Columbia and got her undergraduate degree at Simon Fraser University. She came to Laurier in part for financial reasons: She was offered a scholarship and a teaching assistant job, which would pay for her studies.

But now, she isn't sure if she will keep the job next term. And fellow students in her own program shun her. Recently, an event was abruptly cancelled in which all students and professors in her cultural analysis and social theory program were to have got together over a lecture.

"I wonder if my mere presence is simply too triggering now," she wrote on Twitter. "This place is so weird. I need to get out of here!!"

But she's rethinking that last part. For reasons of principle, she might stay. She was worried no one would want to work with her, but has found a couple of professors who are interested.

And anyway, she said, as if talking to the university: "You shouldn't be able to push me out."

ldamato@therecord.com , Twitter: @DamatoRecord