

Feminists, Gays Respond to Imus

2007-04-18

BY AMY WOOTEN

Notable activists and organizations that called for the termination of shock jock Don Imus, who referred to Rutgers University's women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos" on his radio show the day after the team lost the national championship, have received their wish.

Pulling Imus off the airwaves was a significant move because he is one of the most successful radio personalities in history. Additionally, the shock jock has a laundry list of racist, sexist and homophobic comments he has made throughout the years, and many are calling his termination long overdue.

On April 12, one day after MSNBC dropped its simulcast of Imus in the Morning, CBS announced the termination of Imus' show, effective immediately, more than a week after the radio personality's racist and sexist remarks.

After Imus' remarks, advocates across the nation released statements or spoke out in condemnation of his words, include notable figures such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton. In addition, sponsors started pulling their advertisements from the show.

Many organizations called for the firing of Imus, including 100 Black Men of America, Inc.; the National Organization for Women; The National Association for Black Journalists; The Journalism and Women Symposium; the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Journalists and many others.

Prior to CBS' decision to drop Imus, Windy City Times spoke with Olga Vives, the vice president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in Washington, D.C., who is a lesbian from Chicago. As a feminist organization, NOW's stance was that Imus should be dropped due to a pattern of blatantly offensive comments over the years.

"We know there is a pattern, and one simple apology doesn't take away what he said and the fact that he has said racist and sexist comments in the past," Vives said. "... A simple two week suspension—we view that as a vacation for Imus."

Imus comments came during the 35th anniversary of Title IX, a law that requires equal opportunities for women and girls in educational institutions, including academics and athletics.

"It's really very unfortunate because finally, after 35 years, women athletes are achieving success," Vives told Windy City Times. "Also, women sports are growing in popularity and becoming more accepting. People are getting excited about women's sports. This latest competition for the basketball national title was very popular and people were excited about it."

The doors of opportunity for women athletes have been opened. After 35 years of hard work we don't want to see this being wasted or taken back through comments like Imus.' It's really ridiculing the women athletes' performance by taking them a notch down. We can't tolerate this. It's been a long fight to allow women to be what they want to be and to give them the athletic opportunities afforded to them."

According to Vives, there is no room in today's society for such behavior, especially over the free airwaves. "People have to understand this is not free speech. Racism and sexism hurt people," she said.

Fran Harris—a noted author, entrepreneur and former basketball player herself—weighed in on the controversy. "Imus' comments are a disgrace to journalists everywhere. His ignorance reflects the kind of flippant arrogance so pervasive in mainstream media," she stated in an e-mail. "I wasn't offended as a Black woman who happened to also be a former NCAA basketball champion—I was saddened that another human being could be so blatantly disrespectful of another."

However, Harris added, "His apology was expected and quite frankly, pathetic. Should he [have been] fired? Not necessarily. That won't solve this country's racial problems but I do believe a swift and definite response from MSNBC [was] essential.

Although Imus' recent comments were racist and sexist in nature, the radio host has also made blatant homophobic remarks on his show in the past.

In a statement released by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, executive director Matt Foreman said, "Don Imus blurted out unvarnished racist and sexist epithets at the Rutgers women's basketball team, a group of star athletes and star student citizens. If this was an isolated incident, a sincerely made apology might be considered, but Don Imus is a serial offender and his 'I'm a good person' protestations ring hollow. His defamations rend the social fabric and insult, demean and degrade all of us, but especially the undeserving targets of his rage."

The National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association wrote an open letter to the news industry, encouraging media outlets to look at their content and not allow discriminatory and hateful comments, saying, "... media organizations that give amplitude and credibility to speech have a duty to ensure that it is fair, accurate and free of discrimination and bias. Speech which is hateful and discriminatory should not be tolerated, particularly when done in a forum as powerful as today's broadcast media."

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) condemned Imus' words and applauded MSNBC for dropping the radio host in a recently released statement. GLAAD came after Imus in January 2006 for an edition of Imus in the Morning on MSNBC where he and guest Chris Matthews exchanged anti-gay comments and quoted homophobic remarks made by radio host Michael Savage, who was fired from his MSNBC television show in 2003 for making anti-gay comments on air.

Although several LGBT organizations released statements condemning Imus' comments, some have wondered if the groups lagged in responding. For example, GLAAD released its statement April 12, well after many individuals and organizations had expressed their outrage over the remarks. (See Michelangelo Signorile's views on page 10.)