



CRIME

Hate crime charge added to student suspected of racist, homophobic campus vandalism

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The Western Washington University student arrested Nov. 25 in connection with on-campus racist and homophobic vandalism has been charged with a hate crime.

Shayne Robert Merwin, 20, of Gold Bar is now facing one count of malicious harassment, Washington state's felony hate crime statute, in addition to the second-degree burglary charge, also a felony, according to Whatcom County Superior Court records.

Merwin's arraignment is scheduled for 9 a.m. on Friday.

On Nov. 18, students at WWU reported racist graffiti at Nash Residence Hall, at 689 High St. A University police officer spoke with a man who said he overheard Merwin talking about finding an electronic key and using a marker to deface property with racial slurs and threats of sexual violence, according to court records.

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One woman said she, Merwin, another man and another woman entered Nash Hall using a found key. The woman told police she then saw Merwin use a marker to write on boards and name tags along the hall, as well as overheard him use racial slurs. The other woman also said she saw Merwin write things on the walls, but wasn't aware of what was actually written, records state.

None of the four had permission to enter the residence hall.

Nine name tags on residents' rooms on four floors were defaced. The following day, a racial epithet was found on the Wright's Triangle sculpture near the Ross Engineering Building and a poster in front of Arntzen Hall was defaced with racist language. An additional racist word was found on a pillar at Fairhaven College.

All of the vandalism targeted the African-American, Latino, Japanese and LGBTQ+ communities, and has since been removed. Damage was estimated to be approximately \$150, according to court records.

During an interview with University police on Nov. 25, Merwin allegedly admitted to entering the residence hall and claimed responsibility for the graffiti, records show.

One of the students who had their nameplate defaced with slurs against Japanese people said she was concerned she may have been targeted because of her Japanese heritage. “I saw it and felt scared,” she told police, records state.

Merwin was previously presented with the Gold Bar Mayor’s Youth Achievement Award for community service in 2017, according to a city press release.

On Friday, a couch was found off campus that had a threat directed at a student spray painted on it, WWU spokesman Paul Cocke told The Bellingham Herald in an email Tuesday. Bellingham police referred the case to University police because it was directly related to the vandalism case, Cocke said.

On Monday afternoon, around 200 students held a six-hour sit-in at WWU President Sabah Randhawa’s office to protest how the university handled Merwin’s arrest.

After his arrest, Merwin was no longer allowed at any university housing or dining halls, but was still allowed to attend classes. Cocke said Tuesday that Merwin has decided not to be on campus for the remainder of fall quarter. Whether Merwin returns will be determined through the student conduct process, Cocke said.

On Tuesday, Randhawa sent a note out to the campus community saying that he heard the concerns of students of color and marginalized identities.

“Much of what these students said about their experiences at Western was heart-breaking, especially the words of seniors who have experienced many of the same issues since they first set foot on campus as first-year students,” Randhawa wrote. “It was extremely disheartening to hear that issues of racism, sexual violence, homophobia and other oppression affecting marginalized communities have plagued our campus for far too long, and have too often been met with less than effective responses.”

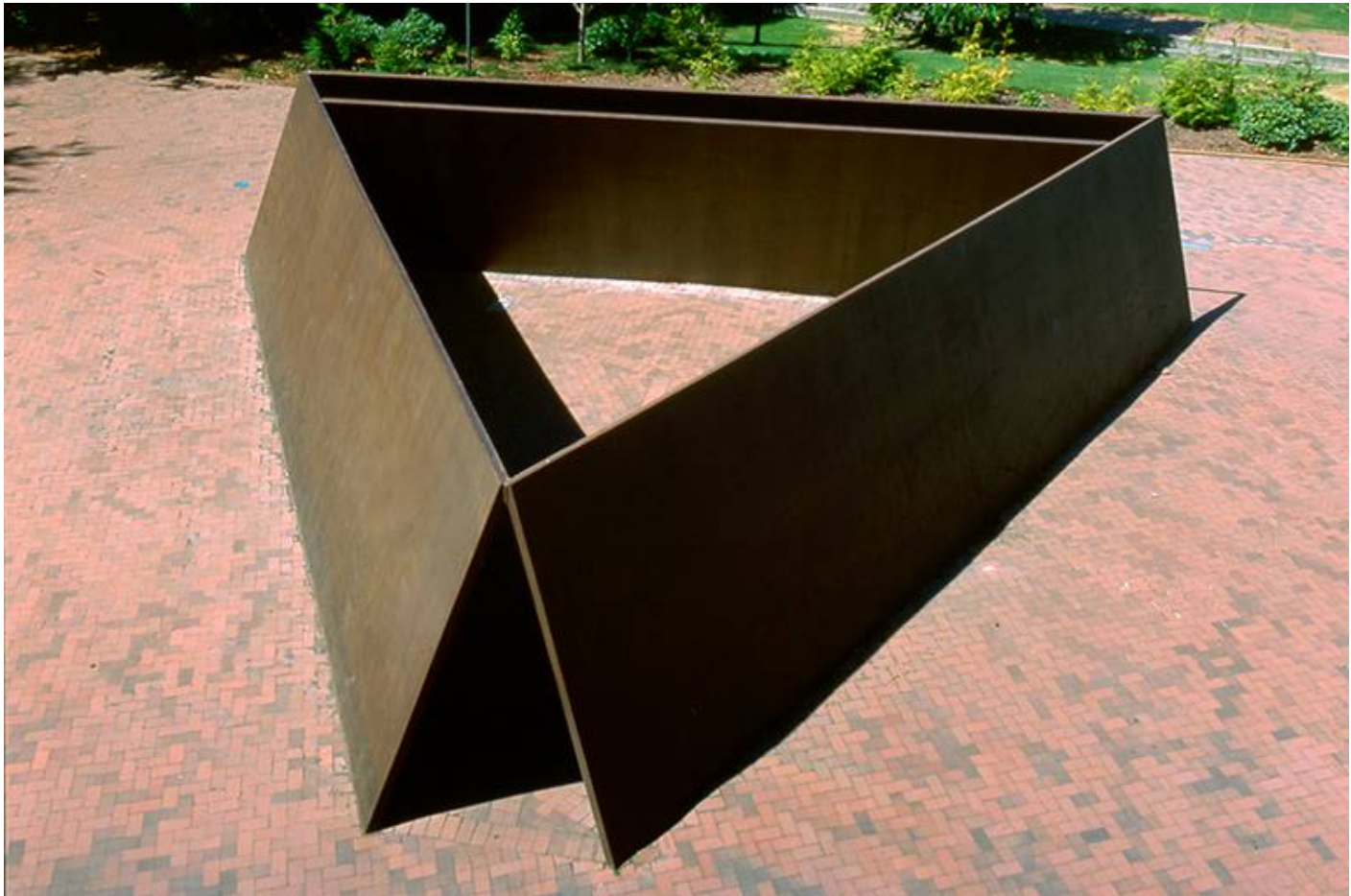
Randhawa’s note outlined several discussion points from the sit-in, including taking students’ safety seriously, diversifying staff, engaging students of color in the dialogue, establishing an ethnic studies program or general education course, establishing an anti-hate task force and increasing communication regarding hate-related incidents.

The students also called for administrators to remove Merwin from campus while he goes through the university’s student conduct process, Randhawa’s note says.

There will be further discussions held on Friday aimed at addressing issues not previously discussed, as well as ways to meaningfully engage students, the note states.

Randhawa said that “this message is not intended to suggest solutions or to list the work that we are doing to advance equity and diversity at Western. It is to make us all aware that a significant group of Western students feel unsafe and not part of Western’s community. We, collectively, need to change this.”

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The Wright's Triangle sculpture near the Ross Engineering Building on the Western Washington University campus had a racial epithet scrawled on it in mid-November — one of several locations on campus that were vandalized with homophobic and racist messages and threats of sexual violence. The graffiti has since been removed and a student has been arrested. Rod de Pozo / Western Washington University - Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

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