



Ars Gratia . . .

A fresh wind

by Roger Ebert

Rumors are like snipers. They are anonymous, but sometimes they can maim or kill. And no matter how naive or dangerous a rumor is, there are always some people who will believe it.

Such a rumor circulated in Champaign-Urbana two weeks ago. According to the story, which was spread by whispers and by anonymous telephone calls, the Champaign Youth Council was "subversive." The rumor had it that communists were using it for a front organization, and that it was spreading left-wing propaganda among local high school students.

Such rumors are not uncommon in our community. We seem to have an ample supply of citizens who are so paranoid on the subject of "subversion" that they will believe almost anything about anybody.

But this rumor was different. It in-

involved an official, city-sponsored activity. The Youth Council is an agency of the Champaign Human Relations Commission, and was established several years ago by the City Council in an effort to bring understanding and harmony to the city's troubled racial situation.

And the rumor had already caused some damage. The principal of Champaign High School, who says he had been told some of the Youth Council's activities were questionable, would not permit the CHS Student Council to participate formally in the Youth Council.

This was the situation when the editor of the Champaign-Urbana Courier wrote a frank, outspoken editorial in which he said it was time for the whispering to stop. The editorial came like a fresh wind in the cesspool of suspicion and ignorance which had already formed in the community.

Now the situation is in the open. Supporters and opponents of the Youth Council have written a deluge of letters to the newspaper, and the subject is debated in local restaurants and on street corners. The processes of free discussion and community debate have started to operate, and a victory will be achieved over the Know-Nothings.

But larger questions remain which still bother me. I am concerned that a local principal would believe, even for a second, that the excellent programs of the Champaign Youth Council could be connected in any way with "subversion." Our nation is on record in support of racial equality and social democracy. The current race revolution, which began in the south and has spread to every corner of the nation, is moving inexorably toward the goal of justice and equality under the Constitution.

Against this tide, the forces of racism and bigotry are fighting a bitter battle. In this community, for example, there are members of the lunatic fringe who preach white supremacy and who spread hate against members of minority groups. Prejudice against Negroes runs high here. A white professor and his Negro wife were recently the target of hate and venom when they tried to purchase a larger home for their family of seven. Their case, sadly enough, is not unique. Champaign-Urbana has a multitude of lessons to learn about brotherhood, social justice, and the application of our democratic heritage.

The influence of our school system should be brought to bear against this sort of backwoods bigotry. Particularly in our high schools, where racial tension is high and there is a tragic lack of understanding and communication between whites and Negroes, programs are needed to break down the barriers of suspicion. When the Champaign Youth Council was formed, this was one of its basic purposes. It has done an admirable job.

Yet the Champaign High School Student Council, which realized the need for greater efforts and wanted to assist in the Youth Council's work, was prevented from doing so by an administrator who had received a handful of protests and who, apparently, had heard the rumors.

Because a local newspaper brought the situation into the open, it is being corrected. William W. From, president of the Unit 4 Board of Education, has taken a courageous and outspoken stand against what he calls "witch-hunting" and "smear tactics" directed at the Youth Council.

Still, it is gravely disturbing that such a ridiculous rumor could gain wide circulation in this university community. The sad story of the "subversive" Youth Council serves only to underline the immediate importance of the council's excellent programs.