

November 4th, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ramie Abounaja, and I am a junior majoring in Biomedical Engineering. I live in Shenkman Hall and I am writing you regarding a recent incident on campus.

Roughly 3 weeks ago, I purchased a Palestinian flag and put it outside my bedroom window, which faces 23rd street. I was motivated to do this after I had seen dozens of different banners and flags hung outside other residential campus living spaces throughout my three years here at GW. Being a first generation American, I am grateful for everything America stands for and everything it has offered my family. I have experienced my family's hardship abroad only through their stories, known history, and the few pictures that remain. I am proud of my Palestinian heritage, as anyone would be, and as Americans, we are able to share our pride, to learn and to teach people about different cultures, especially in a university setting.

On Monday, October 26, 2015 a campus police officer came to my room, stated that the department has received many complaints regarding my flag and that he would leave once he saw that the flag was removed. I immediately removed the flag, as instructed. The officer came back a few minutes later and said that his boss required that he make a report. I felt victimized and criminalized in front of my roommates. He proceeded to take my information and mentioned that over his life long career, has never had to deal with something such as this.

I felt like I was being singled-out, because of my heritage and the viewpoint of my speech, for something I've seen dozens of students, fraternities and other student groups do in my three years at GW. But to be criminalized in front of my roommate and have others around the hall open their doors to see what was happening was uncalled for and unexpected. I was told I had to remove the flag because it broke university policy – but I have checked the Housing Agreement, the University Code of Conduct, and the Residential Community Conduct Guidelines and I couldn't find language with respect to hanging flags and banners on bedroom windows.

Because this event was so upsetting to me, and because my actions did not appear to be in violation of any university policy, on Thursday, October 29, I spoke to a friend and an acquaintance of mine Rhonna Bollig the area coordinator at the Center for Student Engagement who has knowledge of campus regulations. I told her how I was treated, and mentioned that I could find no rule banning the hanging of items on dorm room windows. Rhonna could not refer me any such written rule, and told me that it would be no problem if I hung the flag up *inside* the building. This seemed strange to me, especially since I saw at least five flags/banners hanging outside windows on that one day.

Then, on Tuesday, to my alarm, I received an email from the Graduate Fellow Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities stating that they “received a report from the GW University Police Department regarding [my] behavior” that I was “found to have had a flag out [my] window” and that the letter “serves as a warning that this behavior is a violation of the ‘Code of Student Conduct and/or the Residential Community Conduct Guidelines.’” The letter also warned me to be “respectful” of my “peers” that “my behavior had the potential to leave a profound impact on

the community.” The letter (attached) did not provide any details as to which provision, article or rule I violated.

When I came to GW, I was excited to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor, to spend my time in developing countries where there are many disadvantages and a great demand for medical attention. I am a great student; involved in many different on campus activities, currently holding two e-board positions, and a research position. The events of the last week have left me feeling humiliated, upset and like I can't even feel safe in my own dorm room. I've had finals this week and have found it very hard to study or to think about anything else. I feel like my free speech has been violated because of my national origin.

I have consulted with an attorney and I'm requesting that GW's "warning letter" be immediately retracted, that I receive a public written apology from GW for the police questioning and report, that GW clearly state in writing what their policy is with respect to flags/banners, and that this policy is applied evenly.

Thank you,
Ramie Abounaja