By Adelle MacDowell

What does it mean to hold someone accountable?
This is the question at the center of discussions around a Lamoille meme page on Instagram that has been posting content that names individual Lamoille students. To some students, the page is a forum for “calling out” inappropriate or harmful behavior. School administrators, though, believe the content on the page causes additional harm and conflict.

The Instagram account has been around at least since June of 2019, but the old owner of the account stopped posting that month. The current owner of the meme page began posting on the account in early December 2021, putting the meme account back on the radar of many Lamoille Union students. As of January 3, 2022, the page had 208 followers, and most recent posts have received between 40 and 90 “likes.”

“I’m friends with the old owner,” the student who currently runs the account wrote in response to a direct message on Instagram. “They passed [the account] down to a direct message on Instagram. I received between 40 and 90 “likes.” The owner said they keep their identity secret from nearly everyone, and declined an in-person interview to maintain the secrecy around their identity. “The old owner of course [knows], but that’s about it,” they said. “I have a VPN and I’m not logged into the account on my phone, only on my laptop at home.” They say they are never active on the account at school, since they say it’s “too risky.” Sometimes, they admitted, it’s tempting to tell their friends that they run the account, “but I know that’ll do no good for me so I keep it to myself,” they said.

The majority of memes posted on the account are submitted by LUHS students who DM on occasion, though, “some people have [messaged] me,” told me some info and asked me to make it into a meme,” said the owner. They emphasized that they are careful not to reveal the identity of students who submit memes, keeping the DMs confidential and making sure not to “leak their names.”

The memes on the page range from rape accusations to attacks on the physical appearance of some students. Some memes call students out for predatory or racist behavior. The owner of the meme account doesn’t think the school administration should worry so much about the memes themselves, and said “maybe they should care more about the people that are in the memes, like the rapists or the racists.” They added that “all the ‘harmful memes’ include harmful people.” It’s unclear exactly where the owner draws a line between a meme that is “harmful” and one that isn’t, and it raises the question: Who gets to decide who the “harmful people” are? When does “calling out” cause more harm?

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Bethany Turnbaugh, the dean of students, said that the meme page content has left some students distraught.

“Really private information is being shared,” she said.

Interim principal Bethany Pirie said she’s been working to get to the bottom of the issue.

“When someone is feeling as though their environment is not safe or comfortable at school, like it’s a hostile environment, she said, “but when we’re like, ‘we need to look into this,’ and so we could open an investigation. Pirie said she’s aware of the account and the students who submitted memes will be held accountable if the identity of the owner is discovered.

Pirie is concerned that some memes on the page may violate the school’s Bullying, Harassment, and Harassment policy. The LUHS student handbook states that bullying is “something ‘repeated over time,’ and pauses its victims, or for their families, for their actual or perceived race or color, creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, or disability.”

Many posts on the meme page fit these statements. Pirie said “they could still violate our code of conduct… it’s causing harm to students, whether it is about a protected category or not.”

Students who either follow the account or are aware of its existence have a range of views about its content. Some students feel it’s important to let the page be. “I don’t think I was bullied anybody,” said an anonymous student who submitted memes to the Lamoille Union meme page. “I don’t have anything against the person I made memes about,” another anonymous student said. “It’s like an all fun and games thing.” According to Pirie, the older posts on the account, from 2019, were “kind of mean, but this has kind of just all been jokes.”

With difficult topics like sexual assault, Lyon believes that the meme page can be a good way to share information. “It’s a situation where it’s [hard] to speak out,” she said. “It’s tricky, but if somebody is going to make a meme about it, the fact that it’s funny is going to spread it around, and it’s going to get people to see it, and it’s going to get people to acknowledge it.”

Pirie said she hopes that the account owner will shut down the account, “for their own good.”

If you have any questions or comments about this issue of the Blue & Gold, please email 22amacdowell@luhs18.org. We’d love to hear your feedback!

Happy New Year from the staff of the Blue & Gold!

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