

# Prominent Linfield trustee resigns

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By **Ossie Bladine** • Editor • May 4, 2021

A prominent donor to Linfield University has resigned from her position on the Board of Trustees in solidarity with Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, a tenured professor fired last week.

The university stated Pollack-Pelzner was fired for “deliberately circulating false statements about the university, its employees and its board,” was insubordinate and “interfered with the university’s administration of its responsibilities.”

Ronni Lacroute, co-founder of Willakenzie Estate winery who is known as a major arts philanthropist in the region, made her resignation known in a letter to the board Sunday night.

She told the News-Register that recent actions taken by the administration, particularly the immediate termination of Pollack-Pelzner, pushed her “over the edge,” but that it’s a decision that has been weighing on her since February 2020.

“I sent a letter to the board (last February) saying that unless we address the problems of sexual misconduct on campus, I can’t in good conscience serve on this board,” Lacroute said. She said she had told President Miles Davis multiple times that it has been difficult for her to serve. “I said correct this problem in good faith, or I can’t sit with you.”

The Board of Trustees met over the weekend, primarily in executive session, Lacroute said.

“I didn’t go into the meeting determined to resign” she said. “Several times I have said I have to be convinced (the Board and administration) is acting with regard for faculty and students. I’ve been standing up for faculty and students for years. After the board meeting, it became clear that the only path forward for me was off the board.”

Lacroute has been a donor to the college for decades, including the creation of a \$2 million endowed chair in 2016 to keep Pollack-Pelzner on staff. She said that endowment did not factor in her decision, “but I know (Pollack-Pelzner) as a person so I know his integrity, and that’s helpful,” she said. “If I didn’t know him, I would be less comfortable making a judgment. He’s widely respected.”

University spokesperson Scott Nelson expressed respect for Lacroute’s decision.

“She has been a strong supporter of the university for a long time,” Nelson said. “She’s a wonderful person and one of the best supporters of the arts in the region. We thank her for her contributions to Linfield and wish her nothing but the best.”

**Since last year**, Pollack-Pelzner has accused the board and administration of mishandling sexual misconduct claims. Earlier this year, he stated publicly he was the target of antisemitic remarks by President Miles Davis and Board Chair David Baca.

He was fired last Tuesday, four days after he sent a mass email in response to a “fact sheet” released by the university about investigations into various accusations.

The university has stated the sudden termination of Pollack-Pelzner was justified because it was a result of his actions as an employee, not as a professor. Thus, it states, the employee handbook — not faculty handbook — sets a hearing process that takes precedence.

In an interview with the Oregonian Friday, President Miles Davis said, “The faculty handbook is actually in defiance of Article 3 and Article 11 of the revised university bylaws” adopted when Linfield changed from a college to university last July.

Davis told the newspaper that the faculty handbook is “woefully out of date” and hasn’t been “approved by the administration, who actually are the employers of the faculty members. And that’s a hard conversation for them to hear.”

Davis said Pollack-Pelzner had claimed former Linfield trustee David Jubb faces eight felony sexual assault charges. Jubb was indicted last year on allegations that he sexually abused four students in 2017 and 2019. One of the charges is a felony and seven others are misdemeanors.

Davis also told The Oregonian that the professor made another false statement that the board “condones touching people’s bodies.”

Nelson told the News-Register those are two examples given by Davis as illustrations, but that the university would “prefer to limit its discussion of the circumstances to the former employee or his counsel.”

The fact sheet released by the university stated that in February 2020, a faculty member alleged she was the victim of inappropriate touching by Davis in November 2018 and then by trustee Norm Nixon in November 2019.

Davis told The Oregonian he “leaned over and touched” the faculty member on the shoulder during an event on campus and said he looked forward to seeing her the next day at a meeting.

The university said it hired an outside investigator to examine both allegations. “The investigator found that the incidents did not constitute sexual harassment or assault,” it stated, noting, “Both trustees are Black men and both denied engaging in any inappropriate behavior.”

Linfield has also denied the allegations of antisemitism against both Davis and Baca. An investigation last summer substantiated two of Pollack-Pelzner's nine claims against Davis, partially substantiating that Davis "forcefully conveyed" that Pollack-Pelzner was disloyal to Linfield by including the sexual misconduct allegations in a trustee report, and substantiating an allegation that Pollack-Pelzner felt Davis retaliated against him through a tweet. The investigation found that the professor "endured significant resistance from President Davis and other Linfield leadership."

Many have called for Davis to resign his position. Nelson said the president has no plans to do so and retains the support of the Board of Trustees.

**The Salem Keizer** branch of the NAACP on Friday released findings from an investigation it conducted at the request of Davis.

The report stated Davis has been subject to unfair treatment since his arrival at Linfield in July 2018. It described characterizations by faculty members of Davis as "divisive, intimidating, combative, aggressive, disrespectful and abusive" to be "coded language" for racial "toxic stereotypes."

"White males who exhibit bold, audacious, independent, and free-spirited behaviors are celebrated," the NAACP report stated.

Among its recommendations, the report called for the retraction of "damaging and racialized language used against President Davis" and to "hold those individuals fully responsible for disseminating hatred and divisive language throughout the Linfield community."

When asked for clarification on the language used against Davis, Reginald Richardson, president of the Salem Keizer NAACP, said he would refer to the report which speaks for itself.

On Saturday, Linfield Professor Anna Keesey on Twitter stated the report lacked evidence and said she believes it was a retaliation against faculty members who have been publicly critical of Davis.

"In fact, the faculty who were sought for interviews were, to a person, those who had been quoted in the media offering criticism or evidence against Davis," Keesey posted. "Believing the requests retaliatory, the faculty asked for more information about the investigation, its scope and origins, before agreeing to speak with the report author. The author did not follow up, provide the information, or explain why these whistle-blowers had been targeted."

She concluded the thread by posting: "So while we deeply respect the history and mission of the (NAACP), and we in fact want to learn what it has to teach us about ourselves, we have excellent reason to fear that in this one case, the venerable organization has been

weaponized, to defend a president who for all his many gifts and successes, has conducted himself in a way that gives legitimate rise to descriptors like ‘divisive’ and ‘abusive.’”

**Lacroute said she** still plans on being involved with Linfield programs, faculty and students.

“Linfield is a very special place and I think students get an outstanding education,” she said. “The problem at the moment is not one of education.”

She criticized the administration for lacking a communications strategy throughout recent controversies, and said she fully backs the faculty for speaking out.

She also noted turmoil that sparked as Linfield transitioned into a university, which turned the Faculty Senate into a body with three units: the College of Arts & Sciences, the School of Business and the School of Nursing. She believes faculty between those schools are being treated differently.

“If liberal arts people see something they consider a form of injustice, they are going to speak up, because that’s what they teach,” she said. “The faculty are shocked that maybe if they speak out that they would be let go without due process.”

Lacroute expects anger from some about her resignation and public comments this week. “I don’t know how it will be expressed.” She said Monday she received numerous notes of support from faculty and alumni.

“How are we going to heal? There’s no vision, no long-term planning. It’s totally punitive right now,” she said of the university. “We need to save it somehow.”