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Evergreen president opens door to protest

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The Olympian

Les Purce plays 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' to roomful of students

BY JOHN DODGE

THE OLYMPIAN

About 25 Evergreen State College students and faculty members staged a sit-in Wednesday afternoon in the office of college President Les Purce, demanding he take a public stance against a U.S. military invasion of Iraq.

Purce talked and debated with the protesters - and even played his guitar and sang a song called "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda."

But he refused to speak out against the war.

"This is not an easy thing for me - as a Quaker," Purce conceded at one point.

The song he sang speaks to the grim realities of war from the viewpoint of a World War I veteran who loses both legs in battle.

However, Purce said he can't separate himself from the college.

And the college, as a public institution that reflects many points of view, can't take a stance on the war, Purce insisted. The students were relentless, urging Purce to speak his conscience.

"If we're going to maintain any integrity at this institution, we need to take a stance," said student Katie Falkoff, a member of a group called Students Educating Students About the Middle East.

In a memo to the Evergreen campus community issued Tuesday, Purce said the college would offer counseling services, conflict resolution support and forums for a diversity of opinions and expressions, if war breaks out.

"In the meantime, let us hope and pray for a peaceful resolution to this conflict," he said in the memo.

At a sparsely attended peace rally in Red Square on Wednesday afternoon, the memo

seemed to spur the protesters into calling on Purce in person.

The protesters marched through the Library Building chanting anti-war slogans, arriving outside Purce's office at 1:30 p.m.

After milling around a few minutes, they knocked on Purce's door. He opened it and invited everyone in.

At times, the discussion grew emotional and heated.

"You have a pedestal that we don't have," implored Jess Sanders. "You may lose your job, but people are losing their lives."

"I'm not concerned about my job. I can always find a job," Purce replied.

Purce repeatedly said his main responsibility at Evergreen is to protect the rights of students and foster an educational experience that allows students to hear an array of views.

After nearly two hours of questions, political entreaties, debate - and the one song from Purce - the protesters filtered out of Purce's office about 3:30 p.m.

John Dodge covers the anti-war movement for The Olympian. He can be reached at 360-754-5444 or by e-mail at jdodge@olympia.gannett.com.

Anti-war events

Upcoming anti-war activities in South Sound include:

- Peace activist and political satirist Dave Lippman will perform 7:30 p.m. Friday at The Evergreen State College Longhouse. Cost is \$10 for the general public and \$5 for students, but no one will be turned away.
- A peace vigil for women and children is scheduled in Heritage Park in downtown Olympia at 3 p.m. Saturday on International Women's Day. Participants will attempt to spell out "No War" or "Peace" with their bodies.
- United for Peace Thurston County, a coalition of peace activists, is inviting the public to a potluck 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Traditions Cafe, 300 Fifth Ave. S.W., Olympia, to discuss anti-war strategies to pursue in the days and weeks ahead.

PHOTO CAPTION

A2, 06.03.2003 Les Purce, president of The Evergreen State College, plays his guitar and sings "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" after a group of students entered his office and staged a sit-in demanding he publicly speak out against war. The folk song's lyrics describe the futility of war. Students were participating in an International Day of Action. Mike Salisbury/The Olympian