

‘Committed to Freedom of the Press’

Buford Relies on Principles, Finesse Under Pressure

By C. Kalimah Redd

It was 6:45 a.m. on Oct. 22 when Talia Buford walked into the Hampton University student newspaper office and waited.

For the past two days Buford, the editor of the *Hampton Script*, had been locked in a battle with the administration over the paper’s decision to publish a memo about recent cafeteria health code violations on page three, rather than the front-page as the acting president had requested.



Talia Buford

After a marathon of calls and meetings, Buford learned that the school planned to confiscate the paper.

“I really just needed to be there when they took the papers,” Buford says. “I wanted to see them hauling it away with everything that we had done, down the drain.”

Buford and her staff witnessed the beginning of an event that would attract national media attention, rally first amendment advocates, and prompt discussions about the quality of a journalism education at historically black colleges.

The event also launched Buford, a junior from Flint, Mich., into the spotlight as a symbol of free speech. Within days of the incident, dozens of news agencies and college papers, including NBC and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, contacted the

20-year-old. Her name became a regular on the NABJ, Maynard, Poynter and other Web sites. Listservs and chat rooms also circulated the story.

During the first two days of discussions between Buford and the school, Hampton Script copy editor Erin Walsh said she and the staff were worried that Buford would be kicked out of school.

“Hampton University is not big on the press knowing negative things are going on in the school and she had contacted the press the night she found out they were going to take the paper,” Walsh said. “We thought they were going to discipline her for that. We were all frightened for Talia, but we were all behind her 100 percent.”

After a series of negotiations, Buford and her staff agreed to reprint the paper with the memo on the front page, along with a large disclaimer, in exchange for the formation of a task force to discuss the paper’s future.

Mark Goodman is the executive director of the Student Press Law Center, a non-profit advocacy group for student newspapers, which Buford had kept in touch with throughout the incident. Goodman says Buford relied on her principles to finesse a better situation for the program in an intensely pressure-filled situation.

“Her belief was that [the paper’s] commitment was to fairness and independence, and not appearing to be a propaganda tool for the administration of the

university. That’s what she believed her readers deserved,” Goodman says. “I just think in her situation that’s a really hard thing to do.”

Life since the incident has changed for Buford. People now recognize her when she walks through campus. The newspaper has also gained a new dedicated following of readers.

In a way, Buford says the incident invigorated the student body.

“We didn’t understand how much power we have and we didn’t exercise it enough,” she says. “By the *Hampton Script* standing up for what they believe in and not letting the school push us around, that inspired a lot of students.”

For certain the experience has made the bond between her and her staff much stronger.

“We are such a family,” said Walsh, 20, a junior. “We had each other to lean on. That’s how we were able to get through this.”

So far, Buford has received one internship offer and hopes more will trickle in. The experience has inspired her to continue to grow in the field and make the *Hampton Script* the best student newspaper it can be.

“Now Hampton has a chance to step up and really do something substantial,” she says. “We have been doing big things, and now it is the time for us to blow up and say we are committed to journalism, we are committed to freedom of the press, and we are committed to free speech.”