

Death to student debt

Okanagan College Students join campaign to pressure provincial gov't to ease cost of getting an education

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Penticton Herald
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In support of Tuesday's launch of a province-wide campaign to highlight rising debt loads among students, the Okanagan College Students' Union in Penticton could have easily borrowed the lyrics from a popular 1980s song by the heavy metal band Twisted Sister to emphasize their point:

"We're not gonna take it... anymore!"

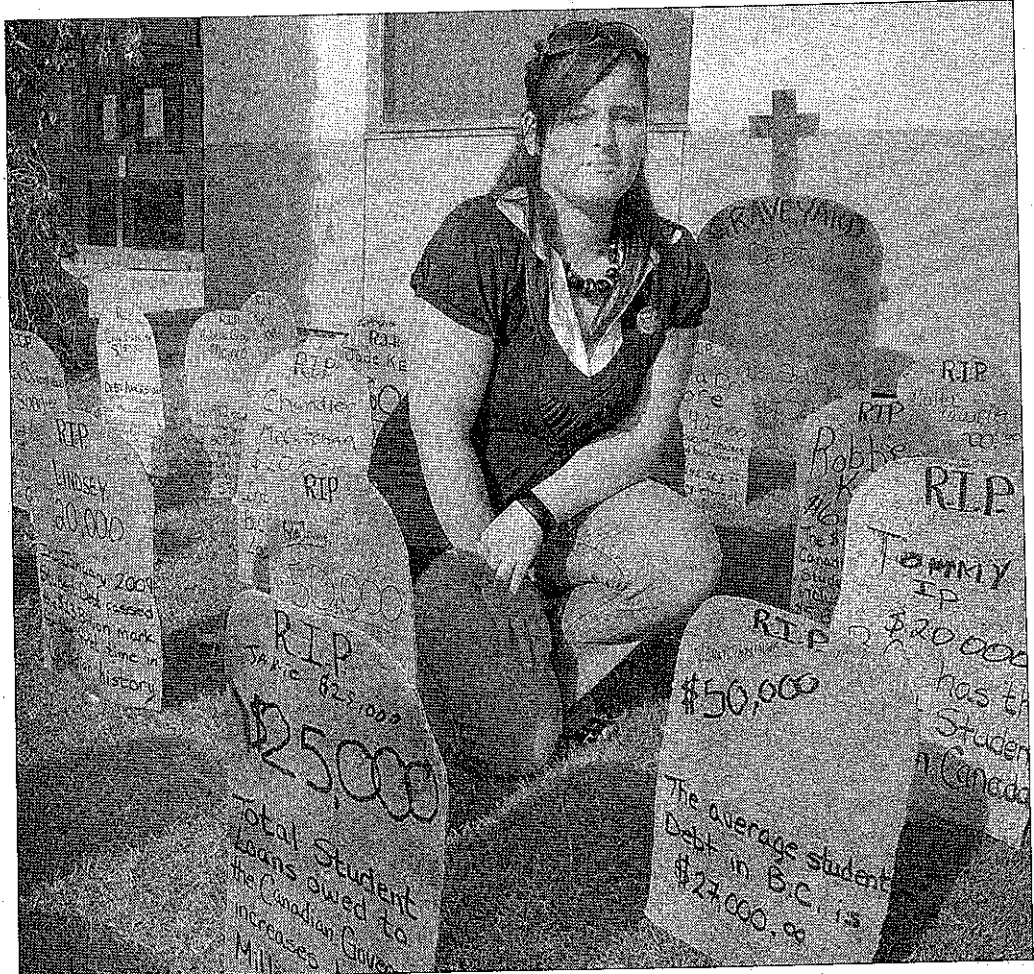
Dubbed Education Should not be a Debt Sentence, the campaign highlights B.C.'s record-high student debt and aims to mobilize students to pressure the provincial government to reduce tuition fees, restore per-student funding for universities and colleges, re-establish a provincial student grants program and eliminate interest on B.C. student loans.

Cory Nelmes, campus chairwoman for the Okanagan College Students' Union in Penticton, was standing among mock headstones in front of the Sunoka Building as she talked about the solidarity movement that began the day Statistics Canada released its annual tuition fee survey.

"We have created a graveyard of debt to represent the debt of different students that attend Okanagan College," she said. "The debt they are either already in or anticipating by the end of their program."

Nelmes said after having the best student grant program in the country about six years ago, B.C. now has the worst. Per capita, students receive the lowest amount of funding in Canada and interest rates on student loans are prime plus 2 1/2 per cent. The average student loan debt for B.C. students is \$28,000 — before interest.

"Newfoundland has just recently abolished interest rates on their



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Cory Nelmes, Penticton campus chairwoman for the Okanagan College Students' Union, helps launch the province-wide Education Should not be a Debt Sentence campaign on Tuesday. Students are protesting the rising debt load among college students. The campaign aims to highlight B.C.'s record-high student debt and pressure the government to reduce tuition fees.

student loans, so we're calling for the B.C. government to follow suit," she said. "Tuition has seen an extreme increase since 2001, and we're calling to have the levels put back to 2001."

Dollar values on the headstones show amounts such as \$4,000 to \$40,000 — and up to a whopping \$350,000 for one student who has aspirations of becoming a brain-surgery specialist.

Although the government has trumpeted the virtue of getting a post-secondary education, the value of that schooling means many students, some of which have families,

will be facing the reality of paying back five-figure amounts after graduation. It offers little comfort to many, including Nelmes.

"Debt aversion is the largest factor in keeping people away," said Nelmes.

"Lower- and middle-income students aren't coming to school because they don't want to pay back the debt. They can't afford all of it. I personally don't know how I will pay my debt back."

That's also the case for Doris Conkey, a single mother of two who has been attending OK College in Kelowna and Penticton for the past

four years with the goal of getting a nursing degree.

Conkey estimates she has accumulated about \$50,000 in student loan and other debts during that time, and added "they could go higher by the time I'm done."

"It's important to speak out against rising student debts or there'll be little hope and no relief in sight for students in this generation or the next, she said.

"It does make it tough because they raise them every year," said Conkey. "It makes you wonder if you're ever going to be able to pay it off."