

# Fair Harvard, Please Meet Geraldo

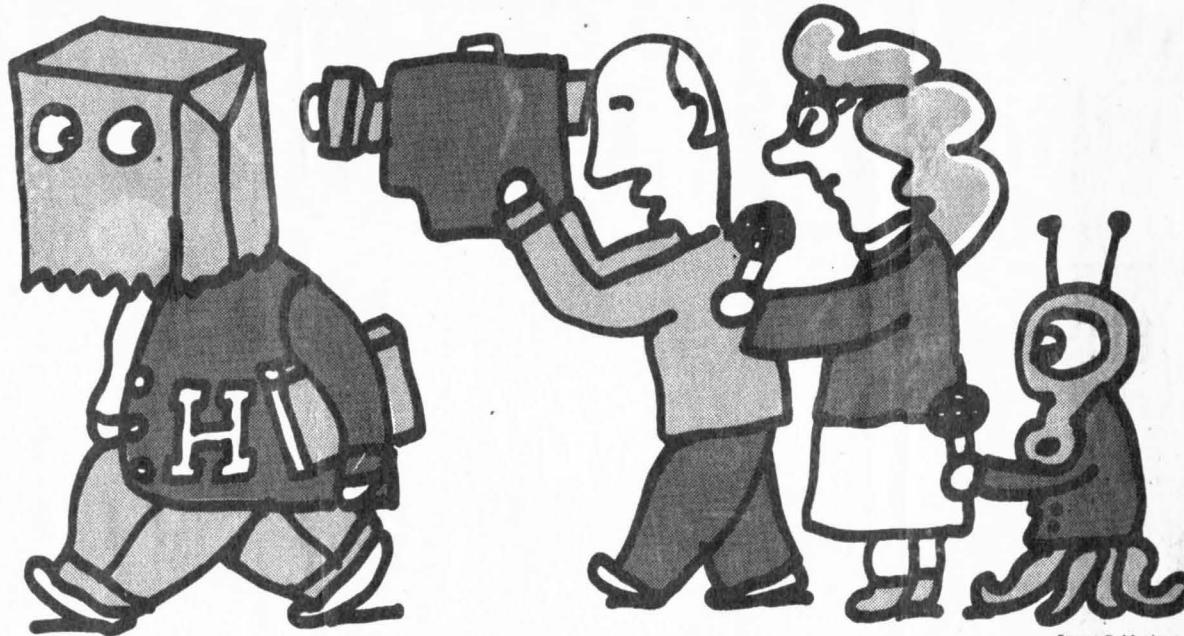
By JENNIFER KINGSON BLOOM

USUALLY commencement at Harvard University draws so much public attention that the school sets up a "media center" offering press kits, sandwiches, telephones and computer hookups to the national and international correspondents who flock to Cambridge, Mass., for the pomp. But this week the welcome mat has already been worn down by reporters and producers from lurid television talk shows prowling the campus for tidbits about the murder-suicide of two female undergraduates last month — and that is only the latest in a series of scandals that have plagued Harvard lately.

Even while university officials are quick to point out that Harvard has had a record year in fund-raising and student admissions, journalists are in pursuit of fouler game. And they have not been disappointed. The number of sensational news stories coming from Harvard this year could easily fill an ivy-covered tabloid.

First, Harvard Medical School issued a scathing criticism of one of its own, John Mack, the Harvard psychiatrist who wrote "Abduction," a book giving credence to people who said they had been captured by space aliens; the nation smirked. Then, Harvard's President, Neil L. Rudenstine, took an unscheduled leave of absence to recover from job stress; he ended up on the cover of Newsweek as a poster boy for the exhausted. And this spring, Harvard rescinded its admissions offer to Gina Grant, a high school senior who had killed her mother in 1990 and lied about it in the application process.

The latest ordeal is, of course, a different matter. Just before Harvard's reunion week, when the university traditionally seeks donations from visiting alumni, a junior pre-med student from Ethiopia stabbed her roommate to death and then hanged herself in a dormitory bathroom. The event was so disturbing that even



Stuart Goldenberg

The National Enquirer avoided it; John Catchcart, the editor, said it was "too depressing."

But that did not stop virtually every other news organization — from CNN and The New York Times to "Hard Copy" — from pursuing it. "Inside Edition" called The Harvard Crimson, the student newspaper (which had received an anonymous note connected to the crime), to offer money to anyone willing to tell all on television (a staff member hung up before a price was named). Then "Geraldo" called The Crimson, dangling job offers to staffers willing to talk (no one has cooperated, said Andrew L. Wright, The Crimson's president).

Geraldo Rivera, who did a show about Gina Grant

(and gleefully concluded that Harvard was wrong in rescinding its offer), said he may not cover the current trauma. "The murder-suicide, while extraordinary for Harvard, is not that unusual for the rest of the country," he said in an interview. "Maybe what Harvard is experiencing is reality coming to Cambridge."

Mr. Rivera said he believed that Harvard's woes and the O.J. Simpson trial have elevated the status of tabloid journalism. "This era brought The New York Times and The National Enquirer and the 'Geraldo' show onto the same plane, with everyone competing for the same stories," he said. "I think a lot of the snobbism of the days of yore is quietly being abandoned as editors

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recognize the public's appetite for stories like the murder-suicide and O.J. Simpson."

At least part of the fascination is in watching the mighty fall. "Harvard has always been like a cliché of the unattainable for people with backgrounds like mine," Mr. Rivera said. And for that reason the public is interested in seeing the school heaped with indignity.

There has been no shortage of that lately. An outbreak of food poisoning at the freshman cafeteria had scores of students vomiting at the university clinic, while local television cameras rolled. Two recent graduates admitted to a judge that they stole \$125,000 from an ice-skating benefit meant to help children with cancer. What would the Lowells and the Cabots have said?

Harvard's publicists — more accustomed to coping with fusty tenure disputes and academic catfights — have been caught blindsided. "It's just been a tremendously stressful year on the press office, but that's what we're here for," said Joseph Wrinn, a Harvard spokesman. "My wife's been keeping a list of weird things that have happened here, and we're up to 47 this year."

Nobody blames anything but bad luck for Harvard's string of griefs, but they have certainly taken an emotional toll. Mr. Wright, the president of The Crimson, said he is thankful that the choice of commencement speaker, Vaclav Havel, the Czech President, has not sparked protest. "I don't think Harvard could deal with a controversial speaker," he said. "I think that would be a little bit too much at this point."