

JOU3131 Lab - Story 3

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UF student charged with robbery after stealing a protest sign

GAINESVILLE, Fla. – Peaceful protests and freedom of speech are commonplace on college campuses. Turlington Plaza, full of foot traffic, students and community members, is the place to go if one wants to be heard.

When an elderly man took a seat on the bricks of the plaza and held a sign protesting the ongoing war in Gaza, his presence blended in among the regular din of the area. That is why when a student forced the sign from the man's hands and ripped it up, those who saw were quick to intervene.

According to the sworn complaint issued by the UFPD, Holden Fin Zeichner, a 20-year-old UF student, grabbed the protest sign from the victim's hand, tore it and threw pieces in the trash at 12:01 p.m. on Feb. 8, 2024.

"I saw the kid snatch it from the man's hands," said Victoria Grant, a UF student who witnessed the struggle for the sign, "It looked like it was about to get physical when a girl came up to them and stopped them."

Multiple witnesses on the scene captured the moment on video and spread it on social media. The video was posted to multiple Instagram accounts that support a cease-fire in Gaza.

“That guy stands here all the time with his sign,” said Elijah Lowe who was nearby when the robbery took place, “I started recording when he tried to get the poster back.”

Students from the Islam on Campus group were sitting with the victim and thanking him for his solidarity with Palestine when the robbery occurred.

“It was really awful to see a student attack an old man like that. He was sitting there minding his own business,” said Ikram Loutfi, a student associated with the Islam on Campus group, who also witnessed the robbery. “The fact that things like this are even happening is heartbreaking. People are just trying to stand up for what they believe is right, why are you picking a fight?”

UFPD arrived on the scene and got the names of the involved parties. After reading Zeichner his Miranda rights, he admitted to taking the sign and throwing parts in the trash.

According to the sworn complaint, Zeichner said, “I was deeply insulted by the sign and elected to protest this display on campus via nonviolent means that wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

According to the Alachua County Office of the Clerk, Zeichner was charged with a third-degree felony for robbery and a second-degree misdemeanor for property damage. Zeichner was also issued a trespass warning by the UFPD, barring him from campus for three years.

Cynthia Roldan, a UF spokesperson, condemned Zeichner's actions, "UF will both keep our students safe and protect speech. Vandalism is not speech; it's crime."

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Sources:

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