


# Author Nicholas Sparks Tried to Ban LGBT Club and Student Protests at His Christian School, Emails Reveal

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 [thedailybeast.com/author-nicholas-sparks-tried-to-ban-lgbt-club-student-protests-at-his-christian-school-emails-reveal](https://www.thedailybeast.com/author-nicholas-sparks-tried-to-ban-lgbt-club-student-protests-at-his-christian-school-emails-reveal)

In 2006, Nicholas Sparks, the prolific romance writer best known for *The Notebook* and *A Walk to Remember*, helped co-found a prep school in New Bern, North Carolina, called the Epiphany School of Global Studies. The idea was to start a small, faith-based academy focused on world issues with an emphasis on language-learning, regular visits to other nations, and a shared understanding that “learning about the world” was an integral part of 21st-century life. In its mission statement, the school of roughly 500 students describes itself as “anchored in the Judeo-Christian commandment to Love God and Your Neighbor as Yourself.”

But since 2014, members of the Epiphany School’s Board of Trustees, including Sparks, have been locked in a legal battle with the academy’s former headmaster and CEO, Saul Benjamin, over what the latter describes as a pattern of harassment, racism, and homophobia. “Sparks and members of the Board unapologetically marginalized, bullied, and harassed members of the School community,” Benjamin’s attorneys wrote in the complaint, “whose religious views and/or identities did not conform to their religiously driven, bigoted preconceptions.”

Sparks rejected the claims in a 29-page declaration to the court. But emails obtained by The Daily Beast show the romance writer repeatedly taking issue with Benjamin’s attempts to make the school inclusive to all faiths, races, and sexualities. (Sparks would not provide The Daily Beast with additional comment for this story.)

In one stern message, Sparks chastised the former headmaster for “what some perceive as an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted.” In another, he put forward a motion to ban student protest at the school, an impulse that came directly in response to two lesbian girls planning to announce their orientation during chapel. In a third, while listing complaints against Benjamin, he cites “misplaced priorities at the school level (GLBT, diversity, the beauty of other religions, as opposed to academic/curricular/global issues, Christian traditions, etc.).”

From: nsparks [REDACTED]  
To: archonshb [REDACTED]  
Subject: Re: Clubs  
Date: Mon, Nov 18, 2013 8:41 am

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Hey Saul,

Good. I'm glad you're in agreement. I'm sure I will be asked that question at the forum, and my answer will be: "There will be no club in the future either."

About the non-discrimination policy you keep bringing up: please remember that sexual orientation was NOT in there originally, and that the *only* reason it was added was that YOU insisted it be specifically be added, or you said that the school might get in serious legal trouble. Frankly, no one but you wanted it in there, preferring to simply phrase it as "we don't discriminate against .... *and other legally protected categories.*" Please stop implying it was something the BOT wanted to do; it's the law. And, I will be checking on how that relates to faith-based schools. If possible, we might be able to change it back to what it was before.

As far as the non-discrimination policy goes, do you realize that I have never, until the last two months, heard this phrase from the headmaster ever when talking about the school? The reason I never heard it was because the school does NOT, nor has it EVER, discriminated. Not allowing them admittance is discrimination. Not allowing them to have a club is NOT discrimination. And -- by the way -- tossing out that phrase "Non-discrimination" to make your point is ineffective; it's forcing the remedy you want down their throats, even if there are other possible remedies.. And again, had you "won their hearts first," you would never need to use it. It's a phrase, in fact, I'd eliminate from your vocabulary at the present time.

Also, remember, we've had gay students before, many of them. Tom handled it quietly and wonderfully, and the students considered themselves fortunate. I expect you to do the same.

Also, after hearing your story, I realize that it's imperative that I quickly offer a BOT resolution, prohibiting "protests" of any kind on campus. Thanks for letting me know about that, and stopping it in the first place.

Finally, we've spent way, way too much time in the first few months talking about "tolerance, diversity, non-discrimination, and LGBT" in these first twelve weeks. There was no simmering, hidden problem with any of these issues, at least as far as the school, or school personnel, or school policy was concerned: Nor was there a simmering problem within the student body.

What you should be talking about -- and what we hope to hear over the rest of the year -- is information about: "Faculty mentoring and curricular improvement, effectively working global lesson plans into the trips we take, college placement improvement, faculty evaluation, and issues concerning the raising of money." In other words, we want you to be the guy you said you'd be when we offered you the job.

Hope your well. Am I still meeting your friend on Tuesday before the BOT forum?

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Benjamin, whose suit includes claims of defamation, also alleges Sparks spread rumors that he suffered from a mental disorder. The former headmaster told The Daily Beast he has never received any such diagnosis, but in another obtained email, the romance writer laid out a case for diagnosing him, citing forgetfulness and an "obsession" with what he characterizes as "non-relevant" issues. "While I am not a doctor--and as scary as this may sound to you--I do believe that [Benjamin] is suffering from a mental illness of some sort," Sparks wrote in the message. "What that is--Alzheimer's, a variance of bi-polar, something else--I have no idea."

Sparks, a former pharmaceutical salesman-turned-love-chronicler, has published 20 novels to tremendous commercial success. In the Sparks literary universe, handsome, hard-working, and occasionally brusque men tend to encounter waifish, strong-headed women, fall passionately, chastely in love, only to have some obstacle--status, sickness, hidden histories--intervene. Tragedies are common, love usually conquers, and Christian values

can often be found in between. All of Sparks' books have become *New York Times* bestsellers, with more than 105 million copies sold internationally, and 75 million in the United States alone; and 11 of them have been adapted to film—each a blockbuster hit, grossing a collective three-quarters of a billion dollars. Just this year, the author announced that a musical version of *The Notebook*—Sparks' most successful novel and a meditation on love outlasting Alzheimer's (the same disease Sparks would later suggest Benjamin had)—was slotted for a Broadway run.

When Benjamin brought up his concerns or attempted to remedy them, he claims he encountered resistance and outright racism.

The conflict dates back to early 2013. At the time, Benjamin, a Jewish-born Quaker, was teaching at the Moroccan university Al Akhawayn, when he got a call from a headhunter about Epiphany. The position seemed interesting—the job would come with a huge pay bump, and the school's emphasis on spirituality and world cultures seemed right up his alley. "I've always been an educator, always globally focused, always keenly interested in the ways that different cultures and different religions and different communities try to help young people discover their potential," Benjamin told *The Daily Beast*. "That's not a speech, that's my faith."

In 2013, Benjamin accepted the position, and moved with his family to New Bern, North Carolina, to start at the school that fall. Almost immediately, according to Benjamin and court documents, he began to notice problems in the school's attitude toward diversity. For one, the school was overwhelmingly white and Christian, with just two black students enrolled that year, despite the fact that African-Americans comprise nearly 40 percent of the county's population. When Benjamin brought up his concerns or attempted to remedy them, he claims he encountered resistance and outright racism.

In one incident, alleged in Benjamin's complaint, Sparks allegedly attributed the school's dearth of black students to the fact that they are "too poor and can't do the academic work." In another, Tracey Lorentzen, a member of Epiphany's Board of Trustees and a defendant in the case, claimed she often drives 35 miles away to shop at the Wal-Mart in Havelock, North Carolina. "Only black people work at the New Bern Wal-Mart," she allegedly said, rendering the facility "dirty"; the Havelock location better suited her since "white people staff that store." When Benjamin hired the first full-time African-American faculty member, he claimed in his complaint that she was subjected to "unwelcome comments and increased scrutiny." When Benjamin arranged a school trip to Washington, D.C. to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech, and talked to students about the school's diversity problems, the Board of Trustees allegedly responded with anger, calling his efforts "provocative." When Benjamin appeared at an event with the president of the local NAACP chapter, Sparks allegedly confronted him, claiming the public association brought "disrepute to Epiphany."

But the real strain supposedly began in October of 2013, when Benjamin began to hear reports that students had been asking teachers questions about sexuality. According to the complaint, the kids had been gathering informally to discuss their own identities and orientations. When word spread of the group, Benjamin said, he began to receive complaints about bullying. Two of the students accused of bullying were sons of Epiphany school administrators; another was the son of an “influential Epiphany parent” and the vice president of the Student Senate. The students, including the Student Senate vice president, allegedly told their classmates they wanted to start “homo-caust.”



The incident seeded tension among the student body and staff. Rumor spread that Benjamin had formed what Sparks called a “gay club,” and the Board of Trustees insisted the club be banned. Two bisexual teachers approached administrators about the group, and were allegedly threatened with termination if they continued to discuss the issue, according to Benjamin’s complaint. It further alleges that at a board meeting on Oct. 30, 2013, a Board of Trustees member claimed Benjamin was “promoting a homosexual culture and agenda.” Sparks allegedly warned Benjamin against pushing the subject, suggesting it would be “wasting time on a side issue,” according to the complaint.

By November, resentments were running high. That month, Benjamin states in his complaint that two LGBT students approached Benjamin and informed him of their plan to stage a protest during chapel. They planned to remove their clothes and announce their orientation in body paint. Benjamin says he asked the girls not to protest, claiming it “was a time for healing, not heroics.” Instead, in the Friday morning Chapel Talk, a weekly tradition at the school, Benjamin spoke about bullying, and the school’s commitment to “loving their neighbors.”

The talk was received poorly, spawning two weeks of in-fighting and interventions. It was in this period in mid-November that Sparks sent the emails now entered as discovery into the public record.

Nicholas here 12/26/13 8:45 AM

From: nsparks  
To: archon@b  
Bcc: catspark  
Subject: Nicholas here  
Date: Sun, Nov 17, 2013 11:24 am

Saul,

In a little while, I'll be sending you my opening remarks for the BOT Forum. I'm just waiting for Trustee comments first.

In regard to your letter: first I want to thank you for writing to the BOT. While I may have more specific comments later, I'm glad that you seem to fully understand the severity of the crisis at the present time.

On a personal level, I'm both angry and frustrated. Again, my life is being made very difficult, and I don't have time for this. I told you this would happen and the BOT told you this would happen if you didn't follow our advice, which was simply, "don't rock the boat on this particular issue." Now, I'm having to put out fires -- big, raging infernos -- because of some of the things that have occurred since the opening days of school.

Trust is hard to attain; it's even harder to regain when lost, and it will be a rough road for you for a while, even among the BOT. Unfortunately, I can't help you with that, other than to again offer my advice. So here goes:

- 1) As I've noted before, you are perceived by some employees to be arrogant, rude and condescending; to these people, you should apologize. I know you want names, but frankly, I don't know that it's all that important. I think you should sit down first -- in order -- with your leadership team, then the rest of the admin, then the faculty, either one by one or in groups, and -- apologize if necessary. And ask them to give you another chance. (Without defensiveness, by the way.) And ask them to frankly call you on it if you do such things again. You are blessed with a very good team and they should all feel appreciated for what they do.
- 2) You should handle the situation with the [REDACTED], and again, keep in mind, they perceived that you were threatening [REDACTED] even if (in your mind) you weren't, and then making a demand that he do something in direct contradiction to his faith. Again, I'd start with an apology, and then listen -- and then ask what YOU can do to make it better.
- 3) Make sure all Christian traditions feel especially Christian, especially as we move into the Christmas season.
- 4) Understand that many people now perceive you as having an agenda with which they disagree. Again, you chose to rock this boat early and hard, not only with Chapel changes (including 4 bells, not 3), but with what some perceive as an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted -- and not only that, it's one of the most important things we need to do to "fix our school." (Perception matters). My opinion is you should have waited at least a year for these kinds of things -- and I said as much to you numerous times -- and I'm not sure how you can fix it, other than to do the things you outlined in your letter. As for the "Club," there obviously can't be one now, though you might open your doors at your home if you feel qualified to talk to them about it in small group settings.
- 5) Numbers 1 and 4, when brought together, seem to imply that you believe the "school needed to be fixed." Academically, yes. Financially, yes. Curricular integration/improvement? Certainly. But spiritually? Frankly, we were good there: it is, and has been since its founding, a kind school, where everyone is kind; it is in fact, the KINDEST school I've ever visited. There has not, for instance, been a single fight in 8 years at the school. People accept other people here; our first student were Jewish. And until the last 2 months, nearly everyone was fine with how we implemented the Christian traditions at the school, which frankly, go a long way toward creating the culture of kindness.
- 6) As to the agenda people assume you have, you can't really blame them for thinking such things. Let's look at the first couple of months: Chapel has changed (Christian equivalence of Islam and Judaism, for example); there's a lot of talk about diversity and how we're awful because we don't have it, we need to have a "GLBT Club," we need to support the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, your references to our non-discrimination policy (as opposed, let's say, to a much heavier emphasis on "celebrating our Christian traditions" -- and on the other hand, not only don't we have a

<http://mail.asd.com/88236-111/ai-dm-cv@mail/FromMessage.aspx> Page 1 of 2

Case 4:14-cv-00186-D Document 233-17 Filed 09/22/18 Page 2 of 3

CONFIDENTIAL PURSUANT TO COURT ORDER NS00009193

Nicholas here 12/26/13 8:45 AM

chaplain, but no one really knows what's going on with the chaplain search. It's easy to see why people believe that you think your "beliefs" are more more important than theirs ... which is the very definition of "having an agenda."

A couple of other things that you need to take to heart:

- 1) To do the things we need to do academically/global/faculty/financial, you have to first win their hearts. You've lost a lot of hearts lately.
- 2) The BOT is in a terrible position right now. And it was, I remember, the one thing we needed you NOT to do.
- 3) While we on the BOT grant that YOU will hire the Chaplain, I must also let you know that there are many, many people who don't believe you will hire the right person for this school and in this community. If I were you, I'd make it even more inclusive than you originally planned, and take their (the community's) recommendations to heart. This is the most important hiring decision you will make this year, and you will either lose people's trust, or gain it, maybe this time for good.
- 4) Regarding diversity, I've now told you half a dozen times that our lack of diversity has NOTHING to do with the school, or anyone at the school. It's not because of what we as a school, has or hasn't done. It has nothing to do with racism, or vestiges of Jim Crow. It comes down to 1) Money and 2) Culture. Even when you have the money, it will be hard sledding, no matter what Jenna does as far as outreach. My point is, if you continually bring this up at the school, it seems to imply that it's the school's fault; that people at the school have done something wrong (which again, goes to numbers 1, 4 & 5). Again, it's not the fault of the school, or anyone at the school, including Janet!!! If you want to talk to someone about diversity, talk to Jenna (who's designing the diversity scholarship program) or me (who will be responsible for raising the money to fund the scholarship program once Jenna has designed it).
- 5) The school was not "broken." It's a great place. It has grown EVERY year since our founding. It needed some academic/global/curricular/financial improvements, but MOST SCHOOLS DO.
- 6) While Dr. Ashton is qualified as a teacher, I noticed that he's not been a school Chaplain before, and I think we have to go with someone who has specific experience in this area. The Chaplain, after all, should be someone who is not only a teacher, but the kind of person who goes to nearly every co-curricular event, the kind that parents love, another face of the school, and almost a youth pastor in temperament. Just my opinion at first glance, though I haven't met him obviously.

Please regard this email in the spirit in which it was intended. While I am angry and frustrated, I'm still the Chairman, and it's part of my job to help you navigate these waters.

I wish you well, and enjoy your time with Dr. Ashton today.

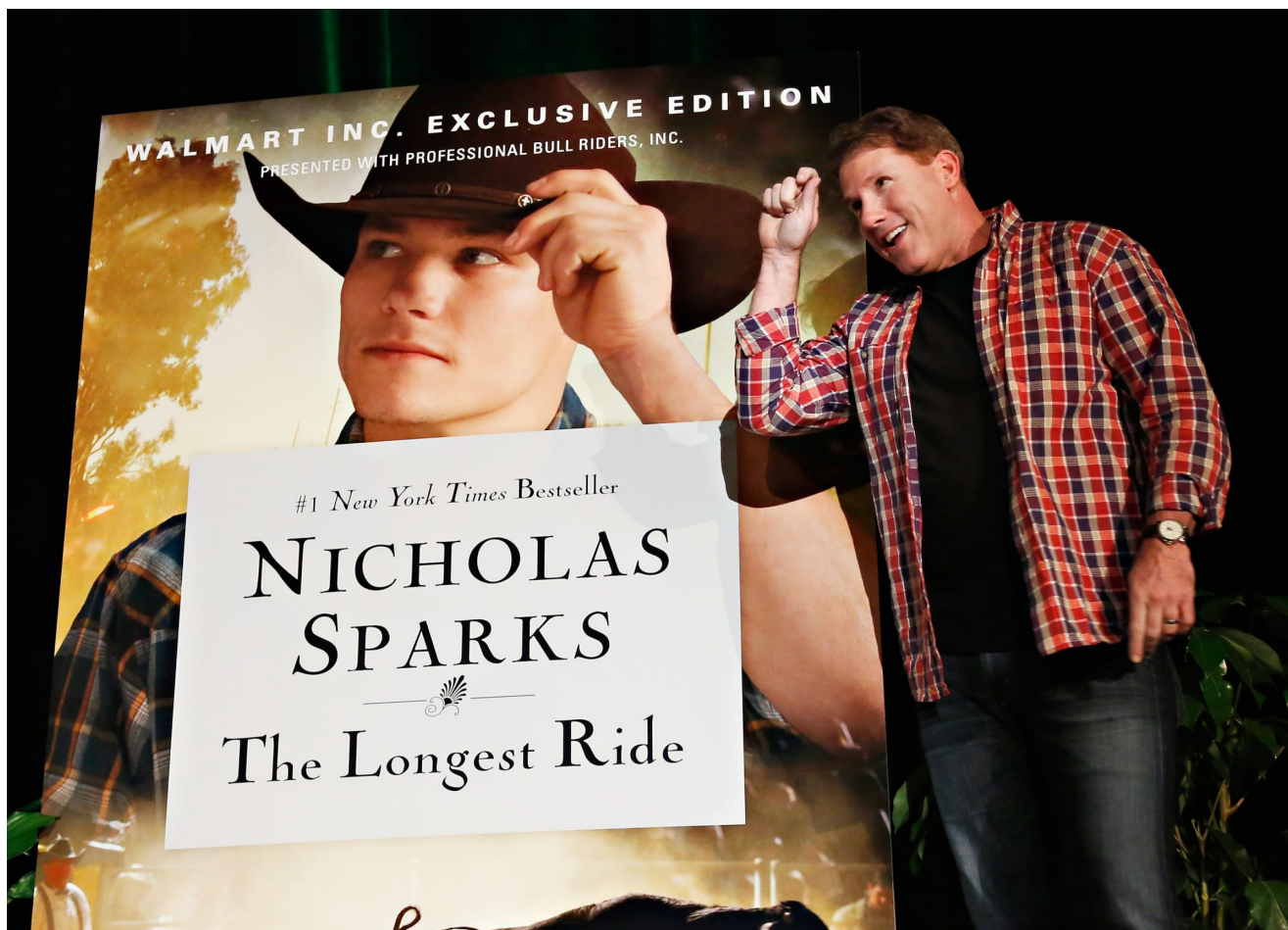
Nicholas

In the first message, sent to Benjamin on November 17, 2013, Sparks told Benjamin he was angry and frustrated about the diversity and tolerance issues. "I told you this would happen... if you didn't follow our advice, which was simply 'don't rock the boat on this particular issue.'" He offered Benjamin a list of recommendations to improve his standing at the school, which ranged from "mak[ing] sure all Christian traditions feel especially Christian, especially as we move into the Christmas season," to refraining from implying the school has problems of tolerance. "It is in fact, the KINDEST school I've ever visited," Sparks wrote. "There has not for instance, been a single fight in 8 years at the school. People accept other people here; our first student here were Jewish [sic]."

Later in the letter, Sparks wrote: "Regarding diversity, I've now told you half a dozen times that our lack of diversity has NOTHING to do with the school or anyone at the school. It's not because of what we as a school has or hasn't done. It has nothing to do with racism or vestiges of Jim Crow. It comes down to 1) Money and 2) Culture."

In a message sent the following morning, Sparks echoed the same points, defending his decision to ban the LGBT group ("not allowing them to have a club is NOT discrimination"), and denying the school had any problem with gay students. "Remember, we've had gay students before, many of them," Sparks wrote. "[The former headmaster] handled it quietly and wonderfully... I expect you to do the same."

Three days later, Sparks called Benjamin into a meeting with the Board of Trustees. In the informal gathering, Benjamin claims in his complaint that the romance writer acted in a “loud, ranting and physically intimidating manner,” calling him a “liar” and insisting he resign. After a lengthy meeting which Benjamin described in the complaint as “false imprisonment,” citing his claim that he was not allowed to speak to a lawyer or use the bathroom, the headmaster resigned. His term lasted 98 days.



Benjamin filed a lawsuit against Sparks and the Board in October of 2014, seeking punitive damages for discrimination, breach of contract, emotional distress and defamation. After five years of hearings and discovery, the case is scheduled for a six-day trial in August.

For his part, Sparks denies the allegations. In his declaration, Sparks attributes the deterioration of their working relationship to complaints that the headmaster could be “aloof, even rude, elitist and dismissive of their beliefs or backgrounds.” He claimed Benjamin had secretly authorized an “official School LGBT club” against school policy, and that the headmaster was often dishonest in his dealings with the Board. “In other words, he lied,” Sparks wrote.

Throughout his career, Sparks has often drawn a hard distinction between “romance novels,” which he characterizes as trite and fantastic, and “love stories,” which he sees as at once more “universal” and realistic. In the FAQ section of his website, the author explains

that love stories can differ in theme, while romance novels always have a general theme: "the taming of a man." In the dichotomy of love and romance, Sparks believes his works air on the side of love.

"Love stories usually end tragically," Sparks writes, "or, at best, on a bittersweet note."