



Cindy Ord

U.S. NEWS 10.03.14

Melissa  
Leon

## Lawsuit Claims Author Nicholas Sparks Is a Racist, Anti-Semitic Bully

The best-selling author of “The Notebook” and a host of celebrated romantic fiction has been accused of discriminatory and autocratic behavior by the former headmaster of his private academy.

In his own words, Nicholas Sparks—author of *The Notebook*, *A Walk to Remember*, and 15 other *New York Times* bestselling romance novels—is “one of the world’s most beloved storytellers.”

In the words of a former employee (and the 47-page complaint that employee filed on Thursday), Sparks is a raging homophobe, an anti-Semite, a racist and a bully, who willfully kept minority students out of the North Carolina private school he founded in 2006, warned employees against publicly associating with blacks, banned students' exposure to non-Christian religions, and discouraged faculty from assisting bullied LGBT students.

The plaintiff, Saul Hillel Benjamin, was hired as headmaster of The Epiphany School of Global Studies in February 2013, under Sparks' instructions to “take our little school and make it amazing, global and open-hearted.” Upon actually making efforts to diversify the school's student body, however (only two of Epiphany's 514 K-12 students were African-American as of August 2013), Benjamin says he was met with a “veritable cauldron of bigotry toward individuals who are not traditionally Christian, and especially who are non-white” from the school's Board of Trustees and from Sparks, who allegedly told Benjamin that “black students are too poor and can't do the academic work.”

When Benjamin attended a community event where the keynote speaker was the president of the local NAACP chapter, he says, Sparks accused him of bringing “disrepute to Epiphany” by publicly associating with African Americans and upsetting certain students’ parents—in a county that is almost 40 percent black.

Benjamin, who is of Jewish heritage and Quaker faith, goes on to claim that after saying the phrase “the Rabbi Jesus” aloud while reading to students from the original Hebrew sources and Greek text of the New Testament, two Board members, Tracy Lorentzen and Ken Gray, snapped, “Don’t ever refer to Jesus Christ as a Rabbi!” Sparks, Benjamin claims, went a step further and ordered the headmaster to stop talking about Islam, Judaism, or any other non-Christian religion altogether at Epiphany functions.

Soon after, according to the complaint, Benjamin’s own faith was put on trial at a forum event where he was ordered by the Board to stand in front of “hundreds of students, parents, faculty and staff” and give an account of his religion—which went against his beliefs as a Quaker, since Quakers “view faith as a private matter and characteristically refrain from involuntary public declarations of faith.” Audience members were invited to air their grievances against the headmaster, which yielded such enlightened responses as “That man, Benjamin, is unfit to be around young people” and “You don’t belong here with us!” Meanwhile, Benjamin says, the Board watched, applauded the parents, and barred the headmaster from responding.

Sparks  
accused him  
of bringing  
“disrepute to  
Epiphany” by  
publicly  
associating  
with African  
Americans.

Benjamin’s efforts to stem bullying against LGBT students, he claims, were also met with hostility. After some students began meeting to discuss issues of sexual identity, other students (led by the son of “an influential Epiphany parent”) began bullying them and were heard saying that they wanted to start a “homo-caust.” Sparks’ response, Benjamin claims, was to “derisively” ask him, “What’s with this gay club?” and order him to “stop this.” Two Board members, Lorentzen and Missy Blackerby, allegedly threatened to fire certain faculty members “if they continued to speak out for or provide private support to the students”—and sue said faculty members personally if

they ever mentioned the threats publicly. Benjamin says the Board accused him of “promoting a homosexual culture and agenda” at the school.

On November 21, 2013, at a meeting where Sparks “acted in a loud, ranting, and physically intimidating manner,” Benjamin was fired from his position as headmaster. Benjamin claims he was locked in a room with Sparks, Gray, and Lorentzen, who refused to let him out unless he signed a resignation letter—not even to use the bathroom, or call his wife or an attorney. After his wife was

eventually allowed in, Benjamin claims they both were “reduced to tears” by Sparks’ physical intimidation. Benjamin signed the letter and was allowed to leave—at which point Sparks, according to the complaint, told Benjamin’s wife he was being terminated due to a “mental illness,” supplying Alzheimer’s disease and bipolar disease as possibilities. Benjamin also claims that Sparks spread word of his “mental illness” to others in the community to ensure that Benjamin could not secure another job. He is seeking monetary damages for “mental anguish and emotional distress,” “loss of past and future income,” as well as damage to both his personal and professional reputation.

Though Epiphany is, officially, a non-denominational school, it claims to root its values “in the Judeo-Christian commandment to Love God and Your Neighbor as Yourself.”

But as the introduction to Benjamin’s complaint states, “You’re going to come across people in your life who will say all the right words at all the right times. But in the end, it’s always their actions you should judge them by. It’s actions, not words, that matter.”

That’s a Nicholas Sparks quote, by the way.



SHARE



TWEET



POST



EMAIL

2 COMMENTS ▾