


Saul Benjamin, Former Headmaster Suing Nicholas Sparks: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know

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On Thursday, The Daily Beast released leaked e-mails between author Nicholas Sparks, 53, and Saul Benjamin, the former headmaster and CEO of the Epiphany School of Global Studies, the North Carolina faith-based prep school that The Notebook writer co-founded in 2006. The two have been in a legal battle since 2014, in which Benjamin accuses Sparks of harassment, racism and homophobia.

In Benjamin's legal complaint his attorney wrote, "Sparks and members of the Board unapologetically marginalized, bullied, and harassed members of the School community, whose religious views and/or identities did not conform to their religiously driven, bigoted preconceptions." In one of the e-mails, Sparks criticized Benjamin for trying to pursue "an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted. Sparks told Benjamin that he has "misplaced priorities at the school level (GLBT, diversity, the beauty of other religions, as opposed to academic/curricular/global issues, Christian traditions, etc.)."

Sparks to The Daily Beast's article with a letter which called Benjamin's allegations "false" and "not news." However, after five years of legal head butting, the lawsuit is scheduled for six-day trial in court this August.

Here's what you need to know about Saul Benjamin...

1. Benjamin is a Jewish Born Quaker

Born Saul Hillel Benjamin, the former headmaster was born a Jewish Quaker. Married with children of his own, he claims in the lawsuit that Sparks publicly humiliated him by forcing him to get up in front of the entire school and justify his Jewish heritage. Benjamin alleges the parents of the students hurled insults at him while the the Epiphany School Board applauded.

In 2014, Scott Schwimer, Sparks' entertainment lawyer, told TMZ, "As a gay, Jewish man who has represented Nick for almost 20 years I find these allegations completely ludicrous and offensive."

2. Benjamin was Teaching in Morocco Before Helping Sparks Open His School

When Benjamin was contacted about a job working at the Epiphany school, he was teaching at the Moroccan university Al Akhawayn. Not only would the job offer him a huge pay raise from his current gig, he was drawn to the school's emphasis on spirituality and world cultures.

Benjamin told The Daily Beast, "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. That's not a speech, that's my faith."

3. Benjamin Claims Sparks Assaulted Him While His Wife Was Present

After Benjamin was fired, his attorneys write in the complaint, "Sparks and others physically intimidated, threatened and assaulted Mr. Benjamin while keeping him trapped in a room for hours without, inter alia, even access to a bathroom (eventually bringing Mr. Benjamin and his wife to tears)."

While Sparks spoke to his wife, Benjamin's lawsuit claims that he "falsely and cynically purport[ed] to 'diagnose' [him] with Alzheimer's," and one of the emails obtained by The Daily Beast appears to back up this claim. In one e-mail obtained Sparks wrote, "I do believe that [Benjamin] is suffering from a mental illness of some sort... What that is — Alzheimer's, a variance of bi-polar, something else — I have no idea."

4. He Noticed Problems with Diversity at The Epiphany School Since Day 1

In 2013, Benjamin moved to New Bern, North Carolina, and accepted the job. Right away, he noticed issues of racism and homophobia. The Epiphany School mostly consisted of white and Christian students, with just two black students. In the lawsuit, Benjamin mentions that he immediately brought up his concerns toward the lack of diversity, but was only met with resistance.

According to Benjamin, Sparks reasoned the lack of black students was because they were "too poor and can't do the academic work." In his complaint, Benjamin also said that when he hired the first full-time African-American faculty member, she was met with "unwelcome comments and increased scrutiny."

In one e-mail 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.”

5. Benjamin Alleges that Sparks is Homophobic

Also in the complaint, Benjamin alleges that students had been casually gathering to discuss their identities and sexual orientations, which caused these classmates to be bullied. Those accused of bullying the students allegedly said they wanted to start “homo-caust.” Sparks answer to squash the issue, which Benjamin claims called “a gay club” was to insist official LGBTQ gatherings be banned.

Sparks response to Benjamin’s reporting of the issue, “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.’”

In another e-mail Sparks wrote, “Remember, we’ve had gay students before, many of them. [The former headmaster] handled it quietly and wonderfully... I expect you to do the same.”