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Gay Whistleblower Fired from St. Andrew's School in Boca: Teacher describes a toxic environment filled with homophobia and racism



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Scott Melton.

"I have to tell you this is the most racist and homophobic place I've ever worked," declared Scott Melton in April at a faculty meeting in front of dozens of teachers, administrators and the board of trustees of Saint Andrew's private school in Boca Raton.

One teacher who attended vividly recalled the meeting.

"When Scott stood up his voice was trembling, you could see he was upset," the teacher said. "He was forceful in saying this school is not welcoming to gay people and people of color and it has to stop."

The day after the meeting, he complained to the head of his department that certain administrators were attempting to cover up a possible sex abuse scandal, alleging that outside authorities were not being notified, as required by Florida law.

The next day Melton, 52, was put on a paid leave of absence – never to return.

Melton, who is an openly gay, black, Jewish man, doesn't know if he was pushed out because of his sexuality, or because he was a whistleblower – or a combination of both.

Regardless, he's devastated and angry.

Melton loved his job as an English, History and German teacher. He loved it so much that when he started 6 years ago he gave up his social life and backed away from his involvement with the gay community in Fort Lauderdale.

"Even being openly out and gay at Saint Andrews was not necessarily a safe thing," he said.

Even though Saint Andrew's is a Christian school, they have a non-discrimination clause that covers sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. Additionally, they have a policy protecting whistleblowers.

Melton resigned from his position at the school on June 27, while still on his leave of absence.

"Since being put on administrative leave with pay, I have been contacted only once. Saint Andrew's School has been negligent and derelict in duty to communicate my status for not only this year but also for the 2016-2017 school year," his letter of resignation reads. "Therefore, due to the hostile work environment and lack of information I have experienced ... I am forced to give my resignation ... and seek employment elsewhere."

Melton filed a lawsuit on Tuesday against the school asking for back pay, lost fringe benefits, compensatory damages and reinstatement. The lawsuit alleges that the school violated state law by retaliating against Melton for being a whistleblower. In an earlier letter to the school from his lawyer he separately alleged discrimination based on his race and sexual orientation.

SFGN interviewed five current teachers at the school, all of whom requested anonymity because they feared retaliation from the administration. It also states in the employee handbook that teachers are not allowed to speak to the press.

"If anyone speaks to the press they'll be immediately fired," one source said. "No one would dare speak out against the administration – it's a retaliatory environment without so much as a second thought."

All five had nothing but glowing things to say about Melton and his teaching. All of them were heartbroken at his treatment and sad that he's no longer at the school. And all of them want justice.

"Scott did the right thing, and they ruined him for it," one source said. Another: "Scott got the rawest deal I've ever seen anywhere." And yet another said Melton wasn't the only one concerned about the sex abuse allegations. "A lot of people were asking about it. But he was targeted. I believe it's because he's gay."

Michael Feehan, an English teacher who retired this year, spoke to SFGN on the record.

"I feel extremely sorry for Scott and do not believe he was treated justly. I respect and admire him. He related very well with students, especially gay students," he said. "And he was very active in providing safe spaces for LGBT students. He was a colleague whom I was proud of."

Melton started at Saint Andrew's in 2010 and for the first four years everything was relatively smooth. But last year an administrator told him in private to tone down the gay content in his classroom. Sources confirmed to SFGN that Melton mentioned those incidents to them around the time they occurred.

In the fall of 2015 he was pulled into a meeting with Sara Rubinstein, Head of the Upper School, where he said she denied that she ever said there was "too much gay content" in his class, but then reprimanded him for showing a video that was pro-gay. Melton also claims she accused him of being anti-Christian.

The content in question was a Betty Bowers video, which apparently caused such a stir that a student complained. Bowers is a character played by Deven Green, a Canadian comedian, performer and musician. She's known for video comedy parodies, including her performance as the satirical character Mrs. Betty Bowers, "America's Best Christian."

"The class was controversial," Melton said of his Theory of Knowledge class. "It was about how do you know what you know. That's the whole purpose of the class, to question belief structures and faith and knowledge."

SFGN also interviewed one of Melton's former students, who requested anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

"His class was amazing. It was my favorite. He always listened. If we had a problem, we could always come to him. We could always trust him," she said. "For the school to treat him with so much disrespect it's really frustrating. He was trying to teach us. To challenge us."

As for the content of the class?

"There were controversial themes but it made you think about both sides, to help you understand," she said. "At school if we were so sensitive to everything we'd be so sheltered and wouldn't be prepared for the real world."

Out And Proud At St. Andrew's

"I felt for Scott," said former teacher Annie Wilkin.

Wilkin, who identifies as a queer woman, only lasted a year at Saint Andrew's. She left in June.

It was her first time working at a Christian school. SFGN asked if she was being naïve about what she would experience there.

"I don't think so," the 29-year-old said. "I got married in the Episcopal Church two months before I arrived. I was so pumped to be there. I went into the year feeling very strongly about being out."

Wilkin said the Episcopal Church was more welcoming than other Christian denominations so she didn't think there would be a problem. She started a QSA (queer straight alliance) with a handful of students at the school.

She was impressed the students wanted to call it a QSA instead of a gay straight alliance in order to be more inclusive.

"To be queer on campus, you have to be a certain type queer. You had to do a particular performance. You could be gay, but not that gay," she explained. "A few of the administrators felt the QSA was a feather in the school's cap. Having a club is one thing. But doing support consistently throughout the year is another. This is a culture that denies diversity of any kind, so it's very difficult to address. These kids are so homogenous."

She explained further that the school really reinforced traditional gender roles so an effeminate gay man would not be as welcome there. And when two of the anonymous sources were asked about "gay content" they thought it was referencing Melton being too flamboyant.

"His expressions, movement of his hands, the way he presented himself. He taunted too gay," one source said. "Here is a guy who is gay, but not involved with any students, blows a whistle on something that shouldn't be happening. And he's put on administrative leave."

Besides the QSA, Wilkin also launched the Positive Space Campaign. That idea, she said, proved to be too radical for the school and it received a chilly reception. Some students complained the project would attempt to shut down their religious beliefs.

The project was started at the University of British Columbia and “aims to foster a welcoming atmosphere and inclusive, respectful dialogue on campus for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities by identifying spaces where sexual and gender diversity is supported and valued.”

“It’s a movement of inclusivity,” Wilkin said. “It’s about creating a space where queer people are welcome.”

Wilkin can’t remember the exact words from one administrator but “the message that I got is that the school would never champion queer rights and never market itself as a school that would support LGBTQ kids.”

Wilkin declined to identify the administrator in question.

She understood the concerns of the students who complained, but also noted that the project would “make it impossible for them to discriminate against gay people. They want to have a worldwide view that excludes gay people. One student [against the project] in particular felt very strongly that it was shutting down the conversation.”

Wilkin said the campaign was really meant to create a safe space for anyone who felt different in some way.

“One of the biggest issues [at the school] was the sort of denial of diversity issues in general,” she noted. For the most part it a feeling that she got on campus. She said it’s hard to articulate.

While Palm Beach County is generally seen as [a progressive place in terms of LGBT rights](#), with more than 90 pro-LGBT laws on the books throughout the county and its municipalities, the same can’t be said for Boca Raton. It was only four years ago when the Palm Beach County Human Rights Council launched the “Boca Bigots Run City Hall” campaign and a city official compared the struggle for LGBT equality to pet lover’s rights.

“What’s to keep other groups from wanting to be protected?” the city official told SFGN at the time. “How about me? I’m a pet lover. I think I should be included in your anti-discrimination law. Someone who has dogs should not be discriminated against either.”

Private School Engulfed in Controversy

This year Saint Andrew’s, which is a private day and boarding school on Jog Road near Glades, has been embroiled in one controversy after another with multiple top officials resigning including some board members.

One of those controversies involved a House Parent accused of being overly friendly with some of the male students who lived on campus. He was caught in a long embrace with one student; a sick student spent 4 nights in a row at his house; and he was caught going to the beach with a student after midnight.

These incidents were not reported to independent or external law enforcement agencies, as Florida law suggests they should have been. Instead, they were closed after an internal investigation concluded that while the teacher’s actions may have been deemed inappropriate, there was no showing of sexual abuse.

The Department of Children and Family services and Boca Raton police department were not notified until April, six months after the school had parted ways with the teacher in question.

An investigation by David Wolowitz, an attorney with McLane Middleton, a New England professional association hired to look into the school’s problems, seemed to indicate that without Scott Melton’s attempts to bring attention to the matter it would have remained under wraps.

“Without the cover up allegations in 2016 ... this matter would not have been raised to the full Board of Trustee level or reported to the DCF and the child protection issues raised now would not have been put forth to be addressed to protect students at Saint Andrew’s in the future,” the investigation reads.

Florida law requires school officials and employees to report suspicion of child abuse to law enforcement authorities or to a child abuse hotline. Failure to do so could result in a third-degree felony charge.

While the investigation did not find any instances of sexual abuse it did outline numerous failings among administrators on how they handled the situation. It also noted administrators were concerned about potential sex abuse.

According to a [news report published in the Sun Sentinel](#), the teacher in question was let go from the school, terminated with a two-month severance package requiring each side to agree to a neutral reference.

The day before Melton was put on his leave of absence he confronted an administrator over the investigation saying the school was not following Florida law by not reporting the incidents to an outside agency.

“While we appreciate your questions regarding specific individuals, please understand that matters related to personnel are confidential,” said St. Andrew’s spokesperson Carlos Barroso said in reference to Melton’s employment at the school.

SFGN also reached out to Rubinstein directly, but she was not able to publicly comment.

The Wolowitz report backs up Melton's claims. In fact, it says this: "I am deeply concerned that some administrators have asserted ... that no students were harmed by the House Parent in question, because there was no sexual misconduct. There is likely no way to determine conclusively what occurred behind closed doors. However, even assuming there was no sexual misconduct there was clearly misconduct. Despite their duty to protect the health, safety, and welfare of students, there is no indication in the Jones Report that either [administrator] took any steps at this point to address the concerns raised about the House Parent's behavior with these ... students."

In a similar incident to Melton's, another former teacher and counselor at the school, Theo Stephenson, is also claiming that she forced out for being a whistleblower. She also happens to be a black woman.

In a letter sent to the school's board of trustees last week she said "[An administrator] has displayed prejudice against people of color, declaring that I am not 'a good fit' for St. Andrew's despite my exemplary track record and credentials."

In the letter Stephenson goes into great detail how she repeatedly alerted the school of another incident where one male student groped a female student and it was never reported to any agency outside of the school.

Stephenson's accusatory email goes on to read that "[The administrator] has shown a pattern of behavior that is detrimental to the health and well-being of the students at St. Andrew's School. She ignores legitimate concerns from trained mental health professionals, sweeps instances of sexual abuse under the rug, and is far more concerned with promoting her own career rather than watching out for the students under her care."

If you have any information regarding this story Jason Parsley can be reached at 561-706-6646 or Jason.Parsley@sfgn.com.

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