

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

IUPUI worker's five-month book dilemma appears at an end

By: Shawna Woodall

Posted: 3/19/08

It is hard to imagine 12 chapters of historical nonfiction causing extensive grief. But After Keith John Sampson Sr., 57, a custodian in Campus Facilities Services, checked out a seemingly harmless book from the public library in October 2007, he found himself facing racial harassment charges from the IUPUI Affirmative Action Office. Sampson was stunned.

He had been dabbling with historical fiction writing for 15 years. His particular interest in studying the Irish-Catholic people came from his father, who had researched their family's roots in Ireland until his death in 2005.

Sampson planned to continue his father's research, but also wanted to enhance his historical writing skills. So he began reading a book about the Irish in Michigan, where he was born and raised.

Now residing, working and studying in Indiana, he had become curious to learn more about the Irish influence in the state. He read about the book, "Notre Dame vs. The Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan" by Todd Tucker, in The Indianapolis Star and checked it out from the library.

The book is a historical recreation of how students defended their Catholic faith and their devotion to the country while the Klan sought to purify America by ridding it of non-Protestant groups. In May 1924, students rioted against a Klan rally in South Bend.

During breaks, Sampson and some of his co-workers often read books around a long conference table in the medical science building.

"Some read the Bible," he says. "Some read the Cosmopolitan."

But Sampson says he never realized reading the book could offend some of his co-workers, especially Nakea Vincent, a Campus Facility Services employee who is named in a letter from the Affirmative Action Office as the person who filed the complaint against him.

Vincent made an allegation to the AAO that Sampson had racially harassed her by "repeatedly reading the book, 'Notre Dame vs. The Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan.'"

Despite a phone call to Vincent's supervisor and a visit to her work place, she was unable to be located for comment, but her name is listed in the November 2007 letter to Sampson as the complainant.

Sampson says that as he was nearing the end of the book, Dale Basey, a Campus Facility Services union representative from AFSCME - American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees - approached him and told him that reading the book was like bringing pornography to work.

"I said to him, 'This is an anti-Klan book. I'll be happy to show it to you,'" Sampson said.

According to Sampson, the union representative told him he could be fired. Sampson says that when he argued that he had a right to read the book, Basey said it would be a favor to him if he stopped bringing it to work. Sampson brought it a few more times to finish it. Sampson said Basey never specifically said he was offending anyone.

Despite two visits to his workplace and e-mail message, Basey could not be reached for comment on what transpired between him and Sampson.

In October, Sampson says his boss, Don Anderson, instructed him to report to the Affirmative Action Office. He met with Marguerite Watkins, assistant affirmative action officer, who told him the book contained Klan propaganda and showed no interest in seeing it.

"I thought as soon as they saw the book and its title they would understand," Sampson said. "I hate the Klan. It's despicable."

Sampson says he went into further detail with Watkins by explaining that he had read the "Autobiography of Malcolm X" three times and he personally believed Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in a conspiracy, all in hopes of demonstrating to Watkins how he felt about two great black Americans. The worst was yet to come for him.

In a letter dated Nov. 25, written and signed by Lillian Charleston, affirmative action officer, Sampson was told the investigation had been completed, and they had concluded his "conduct constitutes racial harassment" for demonstrating "disdain and insensitivity" to his co-workers by repeatedly reading the book. He was also advised "any future substantiated conduct of a similar nature could result in serious disciplinary action."

"It never crossed my mind that I could get into trouble for reading a public library book," says Sampson. "It's ironic that a person who is trying to educate himself about the evils of the Klan is put into the same category as a Klansman."

Sampson contends Vincent never asked him to stop reading the book. He describes himself as a quiet, shy person, and says they never spoke to each other unless it was work related.

When contacted by a reporter, the AAO responded that the incident had been "thoroughly investigated." Other than that, they declined to comment even on questions regarding the office's policies and procedures in investigating such matters.

ACLU lawyer Kenneth J. Falk requested in a Jan. 30 letter to Joseph M. Scodro, Office of University Counsel, that "all references to this matter be deleted from Mr. Sampson's file" and that a formal letter be sent to Sampson addressing "the idea that reading a scholarly work can be deemed 'inflammatory and offensive' and 'racial harassment,' the conclusion that reading a scholarly work can be 'extremely poor judgment,' the apparent belief that it is appropriate for the University to step in to enforce that persons not read scholarly work and the threat that 'any future substantiated conduct' could result in disciplinary action."

Falk sent a second letter to Scodro explaining that Sampson was still patiently waiting for an apology and a notice that the letter had been officially removed from his file.

"It appears that Mr. Sampson's First Amendment rights have been violated," Falk said in the second letter. "I would hope that this could be corrected immediately."

Scodro declined an interview.

In a mass e-mail, Amy Warner, vice chancellor for external affairs, instructed the deans of each school to send any inquiries about the incident to Media Relations. But the story has already gone national.

Tucker, the author, had posted his reaction to the news on Amazon.com, where the book is listed.

"Some of you may have heard about a recent travesty at IUPUI - a major, state-funded institution of higher learning in Indianapolis," he wrote. "A student-employee was found guilty of racial harassment for . . . reading my book, Notre Dame vs. the Klan.

"Anybody taking five minutes to assess the contents of its page on Amazon could determine rapidly that the book is enthusiastically anti-Klan. You could perhaps argue that this shouldn't matter - a college campus ought to be a safe haven for exploration of ideas."

Tucker, who has been threatened by the KKK because of his book, also sent a letter to Chancellor Charles Bantz.

"It would have taken very little investigation by your Affirmative Action Office to determine the gist of my book," said Tucker in his letter.

Tucker described the positive reviews listed on the back of the book and emphasized its subtitle "How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan."

"That the officers cared so little about the nature of the book indicates a certain willful, crusading, aggressive ignorance that surely is to the detriment to the university," Tucker wrote.

Scodro informed Tucker in a phone call that "there is more to the story" and the details cannot be revealed. Sampson, the accused, wonders what the big secret is and hopes to continue focusing on his studies.

Sampson said that he has never spoken with or even met Lillian Charleston. He has no idea why she would be the one to write the letter and is confused why she did not want to check the book out herself.

"If they can stop me from reading one book, they can stop me or anybody from reading any book," he said in an interview.

Dean Robert W. White assigned "Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s" for his Social Movements class later in the fall semester.

"I was a little concerned that someone looking at the book might be offended," White said. "It is my understanding that this is what happened with the book on Notre Dame and the Klan.

"I would hope that we could all get along and that when someone is offended by an activity or behavior, then they could work together to come to a mutually agreed upon solution. Civility and tolerance are very important for everyone at IUPUI."

Sampson wasn't enrolled in classes in the fall 2007 semester, because he had taken time off to work to pay his Bursar bill. He has returned this semester.

Because of his age, Sampson already was worried about getting a job upon graduation. With the letter from the AAO and the racial harassment charge against him, he felt it would only make the job search more difficult. Then, another chapter in the ordeal unfolded.

Sampson received a second letter signed by Lillian Charlestown dated Feb. 7 - but not postmarked until Feb. 21 - that began with, "This letter will replace my prior letter to you..."

In that letter the AAO clarifies that it's permissible "to read scholarly books or other such material" and that the previous letter was intended only to address conduct on Sampson's part that raised concern on the part of his co-workers.

The letter explained that it was the perception of his co-workers that he had been "engaging in conduct for the purpose of creating a hostile atmosphere of antagonism," and it had been his perception that he "was reading a scholarly work during break time and should be permitted to do so whether or not the subject matter is of concern" to his co-workers.

"I am unable to draw any final conclusion concerning what was intended by the conduct," wrote Charlestown in the second letter. "Of course, if the conduct was intended to cause disruption to the work environment, such behavior would be subject to action by the University."

The second letter stated no such adverse disciplinary action has been or will be taken.

Sampson says he still is curious why AAO administrators didn't mention the book, the racial harassment charge, or whether the letters were removed from his file as requested. He said this isn't the apology he was hoping for and wonders why they were unable to draw a final conclusion. He remains uncertain about the prospects of obtaining a job upon graduation.

He will be meeting with ACLU'S Falk to address the second letter.

In 1999, Sampson wrote an editorial in The Sagamore, in which he described the Confederate flag as a symbol of "racism and slavery." He argues he has a history of advocating for minorities and that helps to prove he would not commit racial harassment.

"I thought I was on the side of affirmative action until all of this happened," Sampson said. "It makes me sad. Melancholy."

Sampson says he is going to buy the book and keep it as a reminder that even in the 21st Century books can be banned.

© Copyright 2008 JagBytes