

New Sexual Abuse Lawsuit Filed Against Lakeville Boarding School



In a federal suit filed against the Indian Mountain School, a New York man alleges that two teachers and the headmaster had sexual contact with him when he was a boy.



Christine Dempsey

SALISBURY — A New York man is the latest person to file a lawsuit against a boarding school in the Lakeville section of town.

In a federal suit filed against the Indian Mountain School Thursday, Matthew Bernstein said the school knew that English teacher Christopher Simonds was sexually abusing boys but failed to quickly take action or report it. Bernstein

was abused from 1980 to 1983, it alleges, from when he was 12 to when he was 15.

The lawsuit also alleges that two other staff members, French teacher Windsor Copeland and Headmaster Peter Carleton, had sexual contact with the boy.

"Anyone in a position of trust and authority who has care and custody of children has an obligation to make sure they're safe, and if this entity fails, and intentionally fails, [it] should be held accountable and bear the full weight of the law," said Antonio Ponvert III of Koskoff Koskoff & Bieder, Bernstein's lawyer.

The lawsuit is one of about a dozen that have been filed against the school — some in state court, some in federal — since the early '90s, Ponvert said.

Jody Soja, head of school, said she has not seen the latest complaint and that she is not in a position to talk about its accusations while Indian Mountain School is involved in litigation. Still, she said, "I can assure you that the IMS of today is very different than the one described in the complaint."

"We are saddened and disturbed by the allegations that have been made in the last year about conduct at the school decades ago," she said. "The passage of time makes it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the school then. Indeed, none of the employees from that time period work here anymore.

According to the suit, "It was well-known to Indian Mountain School administrators, faculty and staff, before and during Matthew's attendance at the school, that Simonds surrounded himself with a group of young male students known as 'Simonds' boys' and 'Simonds' pets.' ... School administrators and faculty knew and should have known that 'Simonds' boys' were victims of Simonds' sexual abuse and exploitation."

Bernstein's abuse is alleged to have begun when he was in the 7th grade. According to the lawsuit, it started after the boy starting visiting Simonds in

his apartment, where Simonds allowed him and other boys to smoke cigarettes and marijuana.

During 8th and 9th grade, Bernstein was assigned to live with Simonds, the suit said, and in 9th grade, Simonds once drove him to New York City to buy cocaine and heroin.

Before and during Bernstein's attendance at the school, some staff members were aware that Simonds visited the boys' dorm and individual rooms after lights out, it says. He visited dorm rooms even after school officials came up with a policy prohibiting faculty members from doing so late at night, the suit said.

Even though the school's board of trustees eventually decided that Simonds was a "danger to children" in the spring of 1985, it allowed him to work "for the remainder of the school year and afterwards," the lawsuit alleges.

"In 1992, when the father of an abuse victim contacted the school and threatened to report the abuse himself to the authorities, the school finally followed the law," the suit alleges.

By that time, the statute of limitations had passed. No one was arrested.