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Colorado librarian alleges she was fired for objecting to cancellation of LGBTQ, youth of color programming: “My only option is to speak out”

Brooky Parks filed state and federal discrimination complaints over her firing by High Plains Library District



Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post

Brooky Parks poses for a portrait at the office of Rathod Mohamedbhai LLC in Denver, Colorado, on Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. Parks filed state and federal discrimination complaints alleging she was fired by the High Plains Library District after objecting to the cancellation of programs she had planned for youth of color and LGBTQ teens.

By **ELIZABETH HERNANDEZ** | ehernandez@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

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A Colorado librarian filed state and federal discrimination complaints Friday alleging she was fired by a Weld County library district after objecting to the cancellation of programs she had planned for youth of color and LGBTQ teens — including an anti-racism workshop.

Brooky Parks filed the complaints with the Colorado Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission over her firing by the [High Plains Library District](#) in December, following a move to discourage “inflammatory or polarizing” programming.

Parks said she believes she was terminated from her job at the Erie Community Library branch for advocating for youth of color and LGBTQ youth, who are protected under the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act, and in retaliation for opposing unlawful discriminatory



James Melena, community relations and marketing manager for the High Plains Library District, said the decision to fire Parks was an internal matter that he could not discuss.

Governed by a [seven-member board of trustees](#), the High Plains Library District manages seven branch libraries, including two in Greeley, and is affiliated with six autonomous member libraries.

During a meeting on Nov. 15, the trustees approved programming policy language that states library programs “should not be intended to persuade participants to a particular point of view” and “the district does not present programs that are intentionally inflammatory or polarizing.”

Melena said High Plains’ policy was formalized at that meeting, but wasn’t different from how the library already had been operating.

Part of the drive behind formalizing the policy, he said, was in pursuit of becoming the first library district to win the [Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award](#), established by Congress to promote improved quality of goods and services in U.S. companies and organizations. When asked if those changes were in line with the award, Jennifer Huergo, director of public affairs at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, noted “diversity, equity and inclusion are a focus of the Baldrige Excellence Framework.”

The High Plains policy doesn’t bar controversial programs, Melena said, but prompts staff to pay special attention to them and how they are executed. Melena said a manager would determine whether a program is controversial.

“As an example, we could host a program about gun control and gun rights and keep it informational, but if the program was intended to persuade attendees one way or the other, we would consider that controversial or polarizing,” Melena said.

In Parks’ written discrimination complaint, she wrote: “I was afraid the new policy would be exploited to discriminate against minorities in our community, and it turns out I was right to be afraid.”

“So fabulous at what she did”

Parks was a teen librarian at the Erie branch for three years, developing and running programs that included a teen advisory board, Harry Potter escape rooms, suicide prevention workshops and a book club called Read Woke in which teens read one book per month focusing on different marginalized communities.

“Brooky was so focused and so dedicated and so fabulous at what she did,” said Michelle Sparks, a library associate at the Erie branch. “She was so good at being really sensitive toward understanding what it would take to get the teens to want to come in and hang out or, even better, participate in this teen advisory board. She was so good at thinking through and implementing what kind of programs the teens would be interested in that she was, in my opinion, doing more than I had seen anybody else previously do.”

Sparks was one of six Erie branch employees who corroborated Parks’ allegations in interviews with The Post.

Two days after the November policy changes were instated, Parks said she was called into the office of her boss, Marjorie Elwood. According to Parks, Elwood said that due to the policy changes, Parks needed to rename her Read Woke book club because the word “woke” was polarizing. Parks said Elwood also directed her to cancel two upcoming programs — an anti-racism workshop for teens and an LGBTQ teen program called “Resistance Through History, and You!”

A children’s librarian also was instructed to cancel a program because it featured the words “social justice,” Parks said.

Melena said the programs were not canceled because they were never approved to begin with. “When we were alerted to this, we began the process to correct it,” Melena said. “The rest was an internal HR matter.”

Melena said topics about LGBTQ youth and youth of color are not inherently polarizing, but “the way each topic is presented can be.” Melena said the library has a history of supporting such programs and will continue to host them when planned properly.

Attorney Iris Halpern, of the Denver-based Rathod Mohamedbhai law firm, is representing Parks and said the librarian also intends to file a lawsuit alleging discrimination, retaliation and violations of her First Amendment rights.

“It’s nothing more than sheer racist ideology and homophobic ideology, and our public institutions should not be subscribing,” Halpern said. “It’s sending the wrong message to minorities and saying their story doesn’t matter and their identities need to be erased. Elected officials are not taking seriously their role in representing all their communities and constituents because it’s politically popular right now to discriminate against minority groups as a political tool and an expedient way to gain favor at the ballot box. There’s a sad history of this.”

“Canceling stuff based on their own personal prejudices”



At the same November meeting that the board changed the program policies, Parks and her colleagues came to address the trustees over a long-standing disagreement between library staff and board members: High Plains was one of the only library districts in the state that did not get Martin Luther King Jr. Day off despite having off every other federal holiday.

"As it stands right now, many people in the community have been confused or insulted that the library would recognize all the other federal holidays... except for the one involving a Black man," one public commenter said during the meeting.

During a July 2020 High Plains board meeting, [members discussed issuing a public statement about racism](#) in the wake of [George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis police](#), as [countless public institutions across the nation](#) were doing at the time.

Public comment at the meeting was in favor of releasing a statement in support of the Black community, but board chair Kenneth Poncelow — who is still in that position — argued against doing so, saying taking a stance on social issues unrelated to the workings of the library was not the board's purpose and that the library was not about social change, according to the meeting minutes.

In July 2020, the Public Library Association [issued a statement](#) calling on public library workers to commit to structural change and taking action to end systemic racism and injustice.

Poncelow — a former Fort Lupton police chief — said the library was not supposed to take a stance but that if it chose to, it must also make a statement in support of law enforcement officers, according to the meeting minutes.

"The board members do not represent the communities we serve," Parks said in an interview. "The decisions they're making are harmful to the communities. It's really frustrating to try to do the job we're supposed to do when you have people canceling stuff based on their own personal prejudices."

"Sending a message... that you don't matter"

Parks pushed back on the cancelation of her events.

During the first week of December, Parks was supposed to have her annual performance evaluation, but instead was issued a written warning by Elwood and a human resources representative with negative feedback about her work, Parks said. She said she had never received a bad evaluation or written discipline prior to this situation.

Parks asked to write a rebuttal to her warning, but said she was fired one day after submitting it in mid-December.

"I was not put on any performance improvement plan and had no previous indication that my job was at risk," Parks wrote in her statement. "Instead, the abruptness of the library's decision to raise all of these 'performance issues' just after I began pressing the district on its discrimination policies suggested to me that my termination was purely retaliatory."

Sparks, who is still employed at the Erie branch, said libraries need to be a safe place for all people.

"Our main concern is we are just doing that same old song and dance of 'let's play it safe as long as it's safe for the white people or the cisgender,'" Sparks said. "If we ignore the disenfranchised and we ignore or intentionally mute ourselves in the area of the LGBTQ people or people of color... we're sending a message... that you don't matter..."

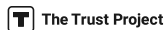
"The message that was sent when Brooky was fired was this is no longer a discussion, we aren't talking about it anymore and you will toe the line."

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