

Clark alleged racist puppet investigation provides no clear answers

<http://www.mycentraljersey.com/story/news/crime/jersey-mayhem/2017/10/27/clark-alleged-racist-puppet-investigation-provides-no-clear-answers/807877001/>

October 27, 2017

By Suzanne Russell

COUNTY - Almost a year after a puppet, viewed as racist by some, was found in a classroom at Arthur L. Johnson High School in Clark that was being used as a locker room by Plainfield High School girls basketball players, it remains unclear if the puppet was displayed for a bias-related purpose, according to the Union County Prosecutor's Office.

In a statement released by the prosecutor's office Friday, nearly 10 months after the incident, the identity of the person who positioned the puppet as it appeared on the day of the basketball game also remains unclear.

The Union County Prosecutor's Office's Bias Unit conducted a thorough investigation of the incident, involving numerous interviews with coaches, faculty and students involved, according to a statement.

"The investigation determined that the puppet in question was created as part of a legitimate school assignment — it was designed to resemble a retired professional basketball player, with a basketball attached to its hand via a string," the statement said.

"However, the identity of the person who positioned it as it appeared on the day of the basketball game, and whether it was done for a bias-related purpose, remain unclear."

On Jan. 7, 2017, when members of the Plainfield High School girls basketball team arrived at Arthur L. Johnson High School for a game, they said they found a black dummy or puppet hanging from its neck by a string with a basketball attached to it in the room.

The puppet was in a blue and white striped tank shirt propped on a wood post with a string around its neck and the string attached to a small basketball propped on a higher wood post in the classroom.

The incident garnered wide media attention and highlighted the racial differences between the two communities.

On social media, some viewed the hanging doll as the kind of racist and violent conduct used by the Ku Klux Klan, noting that Clark, a suburban community, has a 95 percent white population, while Census figures show Plainfield's population is about 50 percent black or African American.

Some on social media said Clark had a reputation of racial issues and black people have avoided driving through Clark for fear of being stopped by police.

Officials from the Clark and Plainfield school districts vowed to investigate, along with the Union County Prosecutor' Officials from the Clark and Plainfield school districts vowed to investigate, along with the Union County Prosecutor's Office.

“The Plainfield School District appreciates the seriousness with which the Union County Prosecutor's Office's Bias Unit conducted its investigation,” Plainfield’s Acting Superintendent of Schools Caryn D. Cooper said in a news statement. “Whatever uncertainties may remain after the conclusion of the investigation, the Plainfield School District hopes and expects that all participants in this matter have gained a greater appreciation for our society's obligation to treat one another without bias and free from discrimination.”

Following the incident, Clark Mayor Sal Bonaccorso attended at a Plainfield City Council meeting to offer his apologies to anyone whose feeling were hurt by the incident at his hometown's high school. Bonaccorso's daughter played for the Clark school's basketball team, but he sat with the Plainfield fans. He said the game was without incident.

At that meeting, Bonaccorso said he wanted the person responsible to be brought to justice. He also wanted Plainfield residents to know that whatever happened, it was done without any offense or malice to the Plainfield team or community.

Anyone with information is still being asked to contact the Prosecutor’s Office Bias Unit at 908-527-4500.

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