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Fans' Anti-Semitic Slurs Incite a Flurry of Reaction at Schools

By JANE GROSS

Basketball fans from the Trinity School, one of New York City's elite private schools, chanted anti-Semitic slurs at a player from the rival Dalton School at a recent game, taunting him with references to gefilte fish, yarmulkes and other Jewish foods and customs.

The incident, at a game in the Dalton gymnasium on Friday last week, produced a storm of controversy, an investigation at Trinity, an apology to the Dalton parent who heard the offensive remarks and complained and intensified classroom discussion at both schools about diversity and tolerance. A spokesman for Trinity was unwilling to say whether or how the offending students would be disciplined. But details of the incident are not in dispute.

The parent, whose letter to Trinity's headmaster was widely distributed by e-mail messages and blogs through private school circles in New York City, is Shelly Palmer, a television producer in Manhattan. He was attending the game with his 14-year-old son, and because the gym was crowded, they were seated in the Trinity section.

Mr. Palmer, in both his letter to the headmaster, Henry C. Moses, and a telephone interview yesterday, said he was inflamed by the behavior of the small group of students and the failure of anyone in the bleachers to challenge them.

"If they had been screaming about watermelon and collard greens, there would have been a race riot," Mr. Palmer said. "Why is it O.K. to be anti-Semitic?"

It isn't, Mr. Palmer said he was told by Mr. Moses. The headmaster called him first thing Monday morning, after the letter had been hand-delivered to Trinity, which is on the Upper West Side. Mr. Moses assured him that he had taken the matter with utmost seriousness, was investigating and would take appropriate action.

"This guy was caught in the headlights, and he did the right thing," Mr. Palmer said.

That investigation was completed by week's end, according to Joel Levy, the New York director of the Anti-Defamation League, who has offered to conduct diversity training at both schools. The results of the inquiry will not be made public, according to a Trinity spokesman, Kevin Ramsey, who spoke on behalf of Mr. Moses, because the students are minors and entitled to privacy.

Mr. Ramsey said that the school's primary goal was to use the incident as an opportunity to reinforce its commitment to "an ethical education that teaches students the difference

between right and wrong and how to choose to do what's right." At Dalton, too, teachers have been leading classroom discussions of the incident.

Mr. Palmer said he agreed that Trinity should keep the results of its investigation private and commended Mr. Moses' quick and thoughtful response. Mr. Palmer added that he and Mr. Moses had discussed one section of his letter, a broad indictment of Trinity's culture, which in retrospect Mr. Palmer said was intemperate and unfair.

"I could have been more constructive," he said. "But I was angry as I've ever been. I was totally unprepared for this. What skill set do I have to deal with something like this? It's easy to be Jewish in New York, or at least it was for me until last Friday night."

Mr. Palmer said that the chanting, focusing on a student with the surname Goldberg, was led by two or three Trinity students but endorsed by the snickering and giggles of perhaps two dozen more seated near them in the stands. A few Trinity parents were also in the section, Mr. Palmer said, but none tried to rein in the unruly behavior.

Mr. Palmer said he turned to his son and said "30 seconds more of this and I'll lose my mind." The boy tried to calm his father by saying "they just sounded stupid." Then his son, who Mr. Palmer asked not be identified, decided to leave the arena.

"He didn't know what to do, and I didn't know what to tell him," Mr. Palmer said. "I should have said something calm and parental when what I wanted to do wasn't the least bit calm and parental. Outrage doesn't describe how mad I was."

As the snickering and taunts continued, Mr. Palmer said, he stood up, collected his coat and tried to follow his son. One of the Trinity students blocked his path, and he said he swatted the boy out of his way. As he left the gym, he said, he was approached by a Dalton security guard who asked, "Sir, did you lay your hands on a kid?" He told the story to the guard, who offered to summon school authorities and seat the Palmers on the Dalton side of the gym.

Mr. Ramsey, without challenging Mr. Palmer's account, said the school "would not discuss specifics."

Mr. Palmer chose instead to go home and write his letter, which quickly became a cause célèbre in Manhattan private school circles. He said he has received more than 1,000 replies by e-mail, mostly sharing his outrage. On a blog frequented by parents and students from both schools, some commend his actions and others accuse him of megalomaniac delusions.