

Wheeling alumnus revokes gift to protest firing

Michael Humphrey | Dec. 8, 2009

A high-profile Wheeling Jesuit University alumnus claims the West Virginia school is losing millions of dollars because of its decision to fire Jesuit Fr. Julio Giuliani in August. In a letter to the university's leadership, the alumnus said the local bishop, who has no official role at the college, masterminded the "lynching." The bishop again denied any involvement, though he did confirm that he opposed a real estate deal between the university under Giuliani and a local religious order.

Steve Haid, a retired government official and lobbyist who served as a special assistant to Giuliani, wrote the letter to revoke a \$650,000 planned-giving pledge to the university. The letter was later published in *The Charleston Gazette*.

"My contribution is just the tip of the iceberg," Haid said.

Angry alumni are claiming a movement is underway to withhold donations to the school in protest. Judy Geary, a member of the Alumni Council executive committee, said she has heard from over 150 members.

"They are irate," Geary said, "and many of them will not donate money when they have in the past."

But Wheeling's acting president, Davitt McAteer, says that his fundraising efforts are actually outpacing last year's.

"Fundraising has increased since Aug. 6," McAteer said, referring to the school's annual fund drive and the day he started his new position. "We have raised somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000 more than the year before."

Haid, a 1963 graduate and former West Virginia secretary of education and the arts, said his reference to losses surrounds planned giving, such as bequeathing cash or property in a will, and he knows of at least \$5 million in pledges that have since been revoked.

"We didn't know about \$450,000 of Steve Haid's planned contribution," said McAteer, referring to the value of property Haid says he had planned to give to Wheeling. "As for the other contributions he's mentioning, we have no record of that."

In the three-page letter, Haid accused Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of orchestrating the dismissal of Giuliani, who served as president at Wheeling for two years.

"First and foremost," Haid wrote, "Father Julio's lynching was the handiwork of Bishop Michael Bransfield, who wanted to slap down a Jesuit priest who sought to acquire the Mount de Chantal property for Wheeling Jesuit."

Mount de Chantal is owned by the Sisters of Visitation, who ran a school on the property until last year.

Giulietti had a deal with the sisters to buy the property, but rumors have persisted online that Bransfield put a stop to the deal and then determined to get Giulietti removed.

Bransfield has repeatedly denied involvement in Giulietti's firing, but did confirm to *NCR* that he wanted the sale of the Mount de Chantal property stopped. The sale never went through.

"I was not in favor of the sale of property to Wheeling Jesuit because the price they offered the sisters was half of the price offered by competing bidders," Bransfield wrote in a message to *NCR*.

The rest of the rumor of Bransfield's intervention is false, says McAteer.

"There was no involvement by Bishop Michael Bransfield in the firing of Julio Giulietti, stop, end of game," said McAteer. "We're seeing the effects of the anonymous Web and the efforts of a small clique who are unhappy. It's the guy in the theater yelling fire."

Jesuit Frs. James Shea, provincial of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, and Charles Currie, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, say they have come to the same conclusion. Currie also said that rumors about a financial scandal causing Giulietti's dismissal were false. Just before the firing, a U.S. Inspector General report was critical of a NASA program based at Wheeling. The report, however, found fault with NASA auditors and not school administration.

"There have been two predominant rumors floating around in this case," said Currie, who served as president at Wheeling from 1972 to 1982. "There are rumors that Father Julio was involved in a scandal and that was wrong. There were also rumors of outside influence and those are also wrong."

Currie agreed that the Bransfield rumors have been fueled by the fact that the chairman of Wheeling's board of directors, William Fisher, is also the finance officer of the diocese. The university's board of directors did not fire Giulietti, technically. After failing to reach a two-thirds majority to remove the president, the board of directors adjourned with no action. Later that same day, three of the five members of the board of trustees, a de facto executive committee made up of four Jesuits and the president, voted to remove Giulietti. One of the trustees, Fr. Ed Glynn, was preparing for a funeral and claims to have had no knowledge of the meeting.

The board is searching for a new president, lay or Jesuit, but Haid says he wants to see the board disbanded and rebuilt first.

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