

UnFAIR? ‘Misinformation’ led to firing of chief librarian, U.S. organization says

Richard Hutton
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

An American organization cited by NOTL library CEO and chief librarian Cathy Simpson in a controversial column has been mischaracterized, its executive director says.

In an interview with The Lake Report, Monica Harris of the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR) said it was “distressing” how some members of the community reacted and that the library board had fired Simpson based on what Harris said were “assumptions about FAIR” that labelled it as a group spouting far-right talking points.

“This is not a right-wing organization and it’s offensive to be accused of it,” Harris said, adding FAIR has chapters in Toronto and British Columbia.

On Feb. 22, as part of Freedom to Read Week, a guest column by Simpson headlined “Censorship and what we are allowed to read” was published in The Lake Report.

After complaints from library staff, a few residents and notably a letter published Feb. 29 from resident Matthew French (“Opinion piece espoused right wing talking points”), the library board fired Simpson last week.

That decision was made without finding out more about her organization, Harris said.



FAIR executive director Monica Harris.

“It seems like they’ve done this without really doing adequate research and due diligence,” Harris said.

“From my perspective, both FAIR and Ms. Simpson had been wrongly branded with these inflammatory and divisive labels,” Harris said. “She was terminated based on misinformation. It’s so tragic. This shouldn’t be happening in a free society.”

Neither FAIR nor Simpson have said or done anything that could be construed as racist, Harris said.

“No one among us — certainly not FAIR — or Ms. Simpson supports racism or discrimination in any form.”

Libraries are in a tough spot, Harris acknowledged. That being said, they have an obligation to provide access to information that

expresses all kinds of viewpoints.

“I can fully appreciate that they have a responsibility — and it’s sacred — to provide access and information to all citizens, including those with perspectives that may be deemed unpopular or offensive,” Harris said.

“This may make people uncomfortable, we get it. This is the price of living in a free society. I think what gets lost in this discussion is that censorship is never an effective way of combating prejudice.”

Only when people talk to each other can progress be made, she said.

“Throughout history, we’ve seen that whenever there are hate speech laws, hate doesn’t disappear,” she said. “The only thing that makes hate disappear is discourse — open discourse — education and bringing people together in respectful discussions.”

Harris said that as a Black woman and a lesbian, she has been on the receiving end of accusations of both racism and homophobia because of her position with FAIR.

“We’re living in a time where a Black woman can be accused of being racist, which I have been ... and a gay woman can be accused of being homophobic. I have been accused of that as well,” she said.

“It’s all nonsense. It presumes that I don’t understand my interests and I don’t understand what

racism is.”

The Lake Report also reached out to the Ontario Library Association for comment but the request was declined.

“We won’t be able to speak to this matter,” said Laurel McLeod, a social media and communications specialist for the organization.

She referred The Lake Report to the NOTL library to discuss the matter.

In explaining its decision, library board chair Daryl Novak said that while Simpson was entitled to expressing free speech, the newspaper column gave the appearance that her opinion was shared by the board.

“There was never for a split second any issue about Cathy’s rights to free speech as an individual,” he told The Lake Report in the wake of Simpson’s dismissal.

“However, our rights to free speech get curtailed somewhat when we associate ourselves with an organization.”

As for FAIR, Harris said the group is only trying to honour the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King.

“He dreamed of a world in which everyone was treated equally and that’s all we at FAIR are advocating,” Harris said.

“We are against discrimination in any form, but somehow, that is seen as enabling systemic racism and is a right-wing talking point.”



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A who’s who of people involved in the NOTL library drama

Richard Hutton
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Here are all the people involved in the upheaval at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library:

At the centre of the controversy:

Cathy Simpson: Former chief librarian and CEO, who was fired over the contents of a column published

in The Lake Report about Freedom to Read Week. Simpson was in the position for more than a decade.

Monica Harris: Executive director of the U.S.-based Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR). Many of FAIR’s talking points were included in Simpson’s column.

The decision-makers: Members of the NOTL Public Library board

Daryl Novak (chair): Retired executive recruiter at Dysart & Jones Associates, former director of operations Ontario Library Service

Wayne Scott (vice-chair): Longtime career in IT and as an executive coach

Ilze Andzans: Director of regional planning for Metrolinx

Benoit Beausoleil: Plant expansion IT director at

Proctor & Gamble
Katie Desharnais: Strategic marketing manager, economic development for Niagara Region

Susan Elliott: PhD, literacy teacher, education administrator and curriculum specialist whose current work focuses on sustainability education and social-emotional learning

Robin (Williams) Foster: Order of Canada recipient, pediatrician and former chief medical officer of health for Niagara Region, provincial health adviser

Adriana Vizzari: NOTL town councillor



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Town **rejects** library neutrality group's bid to address council

Kevin MacLean
The Lake Report

Members of a community group that want the town's integrity commissioner to investigate the circumstances around the firing of NOTL's chief librarian were taken aback Monday to learn they will not be allowed to address town council.

The group promoting library neutrality — the idea that libraries carry a wide range of material representing many viewpoints — was informed by the town clerk's department that their pitch to speak to council on May 14 doesn't meet the rules and policies for delegations.

While library board members are appointed by the municipal council, it is "an autonomous board that operates separate from town council," deputy clerk Shaunna Arenburg told the group via email.

"The decisions of the board are not approved nor defeated by council."

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa told The Lake Report he supports "the clerk's decision to follow the policy of council with respect to delegations."

Group members, who said they had consulted some councillors about how to ensure they could speak at council, were told to take the request to the library board instead.

Tony Powell, one of the members of the library neutrality group, said he was "flabbergasted" by the news.

"My first thought was that there was an attempt to thwart us, but thought that it would get sorted out," he said.

"Regardless of how this first round goes, we are not going away. This does not end the matter."

Powell said it's important for councillors to hear the presentation.

And although he feels it is "appropriate for the board to step down or be obliged to step down," realistically he wants council to order an investigation by the integ-



Andrew Porteus, left, and Tony Powell are two members of a group behind a petition calling on the NOTL Library Board to preserve library neutrality. FILE

rity commissioner "into this whole sorry matter."

The town's website notes that any member of the public also can file a complaint seeking an investigation by integrity commissioner Ted McDermott.

The group has compiled more than 750 names on an online petition protesting the NOTL Public Library board's firing of CEO and chief librarian Cathy Simpson after she wrote an opinion piece in The Lake Report in February marking Freedom to Read Week.

The petition says the library failed "to follow its own policies for protecting library neutrality and viewpoint diversity, and its attempts to ban books or change policies to restrict access to information."

Simpson cited viewpoints of the U.S.-based Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR), which has been labelled by some as a tool of the far right in the United States.

FAIR executive director Monica Harris refuted those claims and said accusations of the group being far right are misinformed.

A second group, the Association of Library Professionals, has also come to Simpson's defence. She has declined to comment on the situation.

Powell said libraries "should be a bastion of free expression and a forum for various viewpoints."

As well, they need to "aspire to neutrality and collect materials that may be unpopular and even of-

fensive to some members of the community."

In a written response to questions from The Lake Report, town clerk Grant Bivol said, "The decision to deny the delegation request was made in accordance with council's delegation policy, which specifies that agenda delegations must pertain to matters within council's statutory jurisdiction."

That policy, contained on Schedule A of the town's procedural bylaw, outlines two kinds of delegations: an agenda delegation and a non-agenda delegation.

The library group noted its application was for the latter and the policy appears to have no restrictions about council jurisdiction related to non-agenda delegations.

The town was asked for clarification on that aspect but none was received by deadline.

"The appointment and oversight of a library's CEO falls under the authority of the public library board," Bivol stated.

"The CEO is an employee of the board, not the municipality, and reports solely to the board."

"Consequently, the request did not meet council's delegation criteria."

Jeff Sykes, another member of the library neutrality group, said, "Results of what the library board does and how it performs lies directly on the shoulders of the town council. They have appointed this board and funded close to a million dollars to operate it."

"Council needs to oversee its budget, expenditures and conduct on behalf of the taxpayer. To silence (almost) 800 signatures of residents because of fear of controversy shows a lack of courage and integrity," he said.

Coun. Wendy Cheropita said she is in favour of council hearing from the group, which she called "passionate" and "polite, not aggressive."

"They're not asking for Cathy's job to be reinstated or something extreme. They just want to make sure that council is aware of how residents feel about this. And I think that's important," she said in an interview Tuesday.

With the amount of support the group has garnered, "You cannot deny them. Residents ultimately pay for library costs," she said.

"And her severance is going to be covered by the residents. So, I think they have every right to be able to be heard."

The clerk's delegation denial can be overturned by a two-thirds vote of councillors present at a meeting and on Wednesday afternoon Cheropita was canvassing her colleagues to see if there were enough votes to support such a move.

Coun. Sandra O'Connor was concerned about personnel matters being debated in public and noted the Public Library Act governs libraries, not town council.

As for supporting a vote allow the delegation to speak to council, O'Connor said she'd have to think about it.

"I'm not sure. I can't say off the top of my head because I haven't looked at all the pros and cons of that. And I hate to say something off the top of my head, because that's a really tricky issue."

"I am in favour of public engagement and letting everybody know, and transparency," she said in an interview Wednesday. But potentially dealing with a personnel issue publicly concerned her.



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Julia Sacco
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

After being denied the chance to speak to town councillors last week, one of the leaders of a

community group upset about the circumstances surrounding the firing of NOTL's chief librarian got his wish Tuesday night.

However, any references to the dismissal of Cathy Simpson were quickly

declared off-limits by Coun. Gary Burroughs, who was chairing the town's committee of the whole meeting.

But Tony Powell was encouraged to offer comments about the need

for library neutrality, the idea that libraries should embrace a wide range of books and viewpoints, even though some people might find them offensive.

During his presentation and in an interview

afterward, Powell said he wants the town to ask integrity commission Ted McDermott to investigate the circumstances of Simpson's firing.

"This all smells," he said. "The woman stands up

and says there should be library neutrality. It's right in line with the library's own policies. All she did is support exactly what she's supposed to," Powell added.

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Walk to School Day a big hit in St. Davids

Richard Wright
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

A group of students in Niagara-on-the-Lake were treated to a special escort from their neighbourhood to their classes from teachers on Wednesday.

The occasion was St. Davids Public School's first-ever Walk to School Day.

The goal was to promote safety and neighbourhood bonding, says principal Carl Glauser.

"We might get to meet a few dogs, we might get to meet a few parents as well and see where the students live," he said. "It could be good for community-building. Parents can meet each other, and also students can feel safe because they are moving as a large group to school."

"My hope is that we can make this a sustainable thing," he said.

"To be a thing from today, moving forward,

Continued on Page 3

Goats and wine ... ain't it fine?

Enjoy your glass with a side of snuggly cuddles at Lakeview Wine Co.



As a unique Mother's Day activity, John and Alexandra Jennings hang with Nigerian dwarf goats while having a glass of wine at Lakeview Wine Co. on Sunday. The goats are there on weekends, weather permitting. **More Mother's Day stories on Page 7.** DAVE VAN DE LAAR



Ross's Ramblings

Ross Robinson
Columnist

Thousands of tulips were effulgent, in so many colours, and the people walking on Queen Street were so happy and friendly and kind.

In our stressful world, with so many people suffering so much, how fortunate we were to have such perfect weather in our wonderful hometown.

The continuing horrors in Gaza and Ukraine, so many

hungry and lonely people around the world — and we enjoyed a perfect Mother's Day on Queen Street.

Family members reaching across generations, helping each other along the sidewalks, stopping to take

pictures with the vibrant tulips.

Grandparents pushing cute little ones in strollers and wagons, and little ones helping grandparents using walkers and wheelchairs.

Senior citizens being

treated to lunch or dinner at our unique and varied restaurants.

Agatha, the manager at Corks and Mama Cucina, told me that every one of

Continued on Page 7

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KANE
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Speaker feels council silenced him to protect library board

Continued from Front Page

The town plans to replace departed library board member Graham Bailey and Powell wants to ensure that whoever is appointed to the post supports the principles of library neutrality.

Powell said repeatedly that he felt “shut down” by council when he tried to provide context about Simpson’s firing.

She was let go in March after her op-ed column about Freedom to Read Week was published in The Lake Report.

The column sparked some complaints from residents and library staff. Some employees reportedly threatened to quit.

However, Powell’s group has gathered nearly 800 names on an online petition supporting library neutrality.

“It’s a little disappointing that from the beginning, (the town has) tried to shut down every presentation,” Powell told The Lake Report afterward.

Last week he asked to speak to council as part of



Tony Powell felt his efforts to speak on library neutrality were “shut down” by council during Tuesday night’s meeting, to protect the library board. JULIA SACCO

a “non-agenda delegation,” but town clerk Grant Bivol said the library board is autonomous and doesn’t report to council, so Powell’s presentation about the library would be outside

the jurisdiction of council. “Which is a load of nonsense. The library board serves at the pleasure of council,” Powell said. This week, because the

library board appointment was on council’s agenda, Powell was permitted to address councillors as an “agenda delegation.” His presentation documents were not

distributed to councillors in advance, but will be now after Burroughs insisted that council members be able to read them.

Powell said it seemed council was “determined to shut down anything that would embarrass the library board.”

When speaking at council, Powell mentioned the termination of Simpson multiple times and was reprimanded by Burroughs.

“The library board needs to believe that the library is not a mouthpiece for any ideology or any point of view. That is critical,” Powell said, adding that this was abandoned when Simpson was fired.

“Mr. Powell, you were instructed that we are not discussing the departure,” Burroughs said.

Powell argued that with a new library board member to be appointed, the background surrounding Simpson’s termination provides important context.

Burroughs again cautioned him, “We still don’t allow personal issues to be brought up that are

not part of this council’s responsibility.”

Powell made it clear he felt council was being unfair.

“Well, it’s nice that you’re shutting me down. I think that’s improper,” he said.

Powell then continued with his presentation, listing some of the fundamental principles that a future library board member should believe in.

He added that the individual should have some persuasive power, in order to avoid what happened to Simpson.

It is clear that Simpson was pilloried because of a differing ideology, he said.

Powell emphasized that the issue of library neutrality will not end with his presentation to council, especially with almost 800 signatures on the group’s petition in support of neutrality.

“It’s not going to fall off the table and it’ll be interesting to see who they do appoint,” he said.

Meanwhile, the town will begin a process to solicit applications for the vacant library board position.

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