

June 11, 2021

I am writing to you as Board Members, administrators, faculty members and fellow parents who know me personally and know my past involvement at Spence.

I attended Spence from 8th grade through 12th, graduating with the Class of 1989. I am Cuban-American and was born to parents who arrived in this country 9 years before I was born so am truly “first gen” in every sense of the word. For more than 25 years I was one of the Spence’s most involved alums. I served on the Board of Trustees for 8 years, have served on the Alumnae Board for well over a decade, co-chaired the Alumnae portion of a record-breaking Capital Campaign, served for many years as Annual Fund Co-Chair, and received the Distinguished Alumna Award in 2014.

I have given thousands of hours and significant amounts of money to Spence. For many years, Spence was at the forefront of our family’s philanthropic activity and was essentially a second job for me in terms of the hours, effort and work that I put into raising money for the school. It was also like a job in the sense of the expectations the School put on me in terms of being available and responsive to its needs.

Between 2012 and yesterday, I was also a Spence parent. When our daughter was accepted to Spence, I wept. I was so proud to be able to give her a Spence education and thought it was the most important and lasting gift I would ever give her.

Over the last several years my husband and I have grown increasingly concerned about certain trends at Spence, including what we believe is a de-emphasis of academic rigor and a single-minded focus on race, diversity and inclusion that is now driving the School and everything that goes on within its walls. As some of you know, my concerns about Spence’s direction led me to resign from my position as an Annual Fund co-chair in 2018. Those concerns also caused us to vote with our feet and make the difficult decision to have our daughter attend high school at a different school. This is a decision we never expected to make and that is entirely attributable to what we see happening at Spence (and many other schools in NYC).

Yesterday was our daughter’s last day at Spence and her graduation from Middle School.

This evening, we learned that yesterday, during our daughter’s last history class, the class was shown a video by “Ziwe” which exemplifies hate speech against white women. My husband and I watched the video in its entirety and were shocked. The video openly derides, humiliates and ridicules white women. It is punctuated at regular intervals by fake ads, which are part of the video’s editorial content and were shown to the class, that end with the slogan “White Women.” There are 2 fake ads in the video of white women touching each other and kissing that were not shown to the class, but the remainder of the video was shown.

Rather than describe the video, I ask that you all watch it for yourselves. Unlike the students in my daughter’s class, you have a choice as to what you watch. The fact that our daughters do not have that choice is all the more reason why you should take the time to see what was deemed worthy of our children’s time and attention in a Spence classroom. It is available on ShowTime (you can search for Ziwe and it is Episode 1: “55%”) or online at <https://www.sho.com/ziwe/season/1>.

I cannot understand why my daughter and her classmates were required to sit through this blatantly racist video. It astounds me that a Spence faculty member felt comfortable showing this to students and

thought it was acceptable to do so. My husband and I understand that no explanation was given to the class as to why this was being shown to them. It had no connection to any class discussions or learning. It appears to have been just a gratuitous display of racist hate speech directed at white women.

For a school that emphasizes how it is “in partnership” with its students’ families, and how it “holds sacred” the trust that parents put in the school by sending our daughters there, what happened in my daughter’s history classroom is a deep and scarring violation of that trust. I believe this incident is emblematic of a larger problem and a sad reflection of the current climate at Spence. It’s a climate we have chosen to leave but I would hope that at least some of you might consider saying “enough” and strive to refocus the school on its former strengths of academic excellence, rigor and true intellectualism.

I wonder whether Spence would be proud to tell its parent community, donors, alums or prospective parents, that *this* video is what it shows its 8<sup>th</sup> graders on graduation day – or any day.

Had the video derided and ridiculed Asian women, Black women or Hispanic women, the Spence community would declare with one voice that it was blatantly racist. In fact, had a similar video been shown making fun of ANY OTHER racial group, Spence, its faculty, the Board and the entire community would be whipped into a frenzy. Take a moment to consider what that reaction would be. Is Ziwe’s video somehow *not* racist and acceptable to Spence because it attacks whites? Are the Board and administration of Spence really okay with having a Spence teacher show this to her students? The video is appalling and I am deeply insulted by it.

While Spence may say that it cannot be in every corner of every classroom (which I have heard before), or that this was a decision by a single faculty member and that the school was unaware that the video would be shown, that excuse does not hold water. There is no doubt that every single faculty member at Spence knows that showing an anti-Black or anti-Hispanic video would be grounds for immediate termination and that they would not dare do this in a Spence classroom if they expected to keep their jobs. How is it that Spence has not made it equally clear to every faculty member that a blatantly anti-white video is equally reprehensible and intolerable? Clearly, this message has not been delivered with any clarity, much less delivered at the same decibel level as the message that hate speech directed at people of color or LGBTQ people has no place in Spence’s classrooms.

After watching the video I feel like I have been gut-punched and I am extremely angry. Angry that our daughter’s last day at Spence -- my alma mater and the school I thought I would one day see her graduate from – ended on this note.

It is very difficult to sit here regretting every ounce of effort and every dollar I have poured into this institution. I feel insulted, humiliated and used. I hate that the school permitted this violation to happen. It confirms the tragic but inescapable conclusion that Spence has lost its way and that there is insufficient oversight of what is going on in Spence’s classrooms.

I recall a Board meeting years ago where I expressed concerns about my daughter’s lower school grade being required to make politically-oriented protest posters during art class and was told that it could not possibly have happened as it was reported to me by my then 9 or 10-year old daughter. Within an hour of the Board meeting’s conclusion, I received calls from two senior Spence administrators confirming that it had in fact happened *exactly as it was reported to me* and that the girls were not given any choice but to make a protest poster. As in that situation, the faculty member who showed the video yesterday had

a captive audience; my daughter (with her strong backbone and confidence to spare) could not walk out of that room yesterday. She had to sit there and watch. So did her classmates.

They sat there in their graduation dresses while the white mothers of the white students – many of whom volunteer, donate, call, email and do whatever the school asks of them – were tarred and feathered in a video their teacher showed them. While their white female teachers were mocked. Spence has failed to provide standards for every member of its faculty that would make it clear that this overt, racist content was NOT okay.

Spence has a smart and committed Board of Trustees. Some of you don't say what you really think during meetings. I hope you will speak up and make your voices heard. While I am leaving, I have many close friends with daughters at Spence and hope to see the current trajectory corrected. I urge you to consider what this event says about how far off course Spence has wandered, and consider taking action to protect Spence's students – ALL of its students -- against racism. If the school is going to be anti-racist (a worthy objective), it should be truly anti-racist and protect all of its students equally.

Perhaps the Board and the School's leadership feel that this anti-white content is appropriate, or even beneficial. If that's the case, the School should be explicit about its agenda. In the meantime, I have left, and taken the most important gift I could ever have given Spence with me.

Spence was a great school and I sincerely hope it will one day be great again. I remain grateful for what Spence taught me and for the teachers I had. I am also grateful for many of the teachers my daughter has had, even if her education has been impacted by the politics *du jour*. I am deeply saddened by what I have seen happening at Spence and am completely gutted (and very angry) over what happened on my daughter's last day at my once-beloved school. I hope that those of you who know the passionate commitment I felt to Spence, and acted on, for most of three decades of my life will understand just how hurtful this experience has been and perhaps be impelled to take some action to right the ship.

I am left wondering...What would Clara Spence think? What would she say to me? What would she say to my daughter?

*Spence needs to do better than this and I believe that the family of every student in that class is owed an apology from the school. Racism is racism.*

Sincerely,

/s/

Gabriela P. Baron, '89