

Restaurateur: Superintendent 'Made A Scene'

Written by Steve Frank

Monday, 21 January 2013 15:34

The cryptic message delivered at last week's Watauga Board of Education meeting by new board member Barbara Kinsey may be coming a bit clearer, that with the surfacing of a letter from local restaurateur Chase Luddeke of Mellow Mushroom. That letter, posted in its entirety below, tells of an interaction at the King Street restaurant over the holiday season, ending with a scene allegedly instigated by Watauga Schools Superintendent Dr. David Kafitz. I obtained the letter from a third party, but Kinsey said she received the exact same letter from Luddeke himself, and confirmed its authenticity. In the two-page letter to Dr. Kafitz, Chase Luddeke recounts the interaction over a discount—given to Dr. Kafitz through a band booster's card, but a discount Kafitz apparently felt was insufficient. The conversation reached its climax with Dr. Kafitz telling Luddeke that, "As superintendent of Watauga County Schools, I will make sure that Mellow Mushroom is not allowed to participate in the Pioneer Card next year." Luddeke outlined the many ways that Mellow Mushroom and many other locally owned businesses help and give to the schools, concluding his letter saying, "No matter what your stance, we here at Mellow Mushroom will always do our best to stand up and support our county's schools." Kinsey told of other reports she and the board received of a similar nature, and I told her of an interaction I was informed of between the superintendent and an elections board official that was highly agitated and unprofessional. I called Dr. Kafitz before noon today, but have not heard back from him with his account of any of these incidents. In her open statement, Kinsey told those who reported various information to the new board members that 'we heard you.' What happens next is unclear at this point.

That letter:

Dr. Kafitz,

My name is Chase Luddeke, and I am the General Manager of my family's business, the Mellow Mushroom in downtown Boone. The reason I am writing this letter is that I wanted to relay my disappointment with our first and only interaction. After much deliberation, I have decided to bring this to your attention, as well as the attention of your colleagues, and those whom you will be serving as the newly appointed superintendent of the Watauga County School System. My intention is to offer the vantage point of the many local businesses that proudly support the school system that is now your charge. By doing so, I can hopefully prevent any further offense or discouragement from you during your patronage to these businesses. During your visit to our restaurant over the holiday break, you presented a Pioneer Band Card at the conclusion of your meal. The server discounted the meal exactly as she had been instructed, and as is specifically noted on the card. When the discount was applied you began making a scene, dissatisfied that the discount was not enough. Such a scene in fact, a guest at a neighboring table felt the necessity to apologize on your behalf. After you were unnecessarily short with the waitress, she notified me that there was a problem. I looked over the discount, and noted it was the same exact discount I have applied, without issue, hundreds of times to Pioneer cardholder's checks. Typically the response from the cardholder is one that is gracious, both for the discount, and for our continued support of fundraising programs throughout Watauga County Schools. After all,

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the purpose of the card is to support our schools, not to haggle the participating businesses. I arrived at the table with the full intention of explaining how the discount is applied, based upon the language on the card. Once again, I have been applying the discount the same way since the first day of our involvement in the program, and not once have I received a single complaint, or any notification of wrong doing. You were not willing to listen to what I had to say, and even less willing to maturely discuss the matter. Instead you offered a childish, and ill-conceived response that brought the situation no closer to any type of resolution. It was this statement that left such a negative and foreboding impression on me about the newest Superintendent of our county's schools. "As the superintendent of Watauga County Schools, I will make sure that Mellow

Mushroom is not allowed to participate in the Pioneer Card next year." Put the whole issue of the discount aside. It is solely that statement that presents my problem. You flouted your position with pomp, arrogance, and without considering the potential consequences of your posturing. Needless to say I was taken aback. So much in fact I thought surely you were not really the superintendent, but just an angry guest contriving this story as an attempt at intimidating a waitress and a restaurant manager into more discounts. Unfortunately this was not the case. After further investigation I was able to confirm that you are in fact the Superintendent, and that you are quickly building a reputation throughout the county for the type of behavior that I had just experienced. Since Mellow Mushroom opened its doors in 1996 we have consistently been involved in supporting Watauga County Schools. We are a family owned and operated business that takes pride in being a part of our community. We have volunteered countless amounts of time, energy, and donations to any and every school, and school program, that has ever made the request. In fact, as I type this letter, there is a thank you note from Mabel School sitting on my desk, politely thanking Mellow Mushroom for donating to their Fall Festival. From gift certificates, anonymous donations, ads in the yearbook, second grade field trips, speeches to the advertising and marketing classes, the annual DECA fundraiser, and the donation of hundreds upon hundreds of pizzas, we have always done our best to give back to the school system that provided so much for our family.

The story of the Mellow Mushroom is in no way unique. There are hundreds of businesses across the county that would do anything possible to help play their part in supporting our schools. My concern, Dr. Kafitz, is that either you do not realize, or appreciate, the value of this support. What you have threatened is in fact the very antithesis of what you have been hired to do. Your threat to exclude Mellow Mushroom from school sponsored fundraising events, takes opportunities and potential funding away from our schools. Your self-serving behavior sacrifices the well being of our school system for the personal gratification you received from being condescending to the staff of a local restaurant.

Going forward, I implore you to please re-evaluate your decision to exclude Mellow Mushroom from further fundraising programs. I am confident that you are very out of place in speaking on the behalf of the students and faculty that these programs support. I trust that you will realize that the alienation of our local businesses to satisfy your ego, is not the type of behavior Watauga County schools deserve. I also hope, for the betterment of our schools, that your attitude towards the position of superintendent evolves to be more deliberate in thought, and constructive in action. Finally, no matter what your stance, we here at Mellow Mushroom will

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always do our best to stand up and support our county's schools. Thank you for your time.

Keep it Mellow.

Chase Luddeke

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