

OPINIONCOMMENTARY

Gibson's Bakery and Why I Quit Teaching at Oberlin

The Ohio Supreme Court upholds a \$36 million legal judgment against the college.

am Socher

: 1:17 pm ET

Every year as Labor Day approaches, I think about meeting a new group of interested, occasionally brilliant students. And then I remember why I quit Oberlin College: deans.

This week the Ohio Supreme Court gave me 36 million reminders. It declined to take up Oberlin's final appeal of a massive civil judgment against the school for defamation and tortious interference against the Gibson family and the 137-year-old Gibson's Bakery.

The case began when an Oberlin student attempted to shoplift some wine, but the dean of students, Meredith Raimondo, along with administration underlings and colleagues, really drove this \$36 million train.

On Nov. 9, 2016, Allyn Gibson, who is white, caught Jonathan Aladin, who is black, trying to buy a bottle of wine with a fake ID while hiding two more bottles under his shirt. Mr. Gibson tried to take a photo of Mr. Aladin, who grabbed the phone and fled, with Mr. Gibson following. Outside the store they tussled, with Mr. Gibson getting the worst of it especially after two of Mr. Aladin's friends joined in. Bodycam footage from a few minutes later shows Mr. Aladin asking an Oberlin police officer why he and his friends, who were also black, were being arrested and not Mr. Gibson. "Well," the officer responds reasonably, "when we got here, you all were on top of him, whaling on him."

Town-gown conflicts have arisen for centuries over students stealing from and brawling with townies. Shoplifting by Oberlin students was a longstanding problem. What was shocking was the way Dean Raimondo and her colleagues whipped up student anger, helped organize protests in front of the store, tried to destroy Gibson's through formal and informal boycotts, and ruthlessly defamed the family as racist in speech and print.

As Assistant Dean of Students Antoinette Myers texted Ms. Raimondo from the criminal trial where Mr. Aladin and his friends pleaded guilty to attempted theft, aggravated trespassing and underage

purchase of alcohol: “I hope we rain fire and brimstone on that store.” All three defendants read statements in court acknowledging that they hadn’t been targeted for their race.

Ms. Raimondo and her army of deans, associate deans, assistant deans and the occasional professor acted not as educators but more like old-fashioned ward bosses—organizing constituents, trumping up grievances, and pointing them anywhere but the administration building. The way administrative bloat in universities has driven up tuition costs has often been pointed out, but *Gibson’s Bakery v. Oberlin College* points to another cost that will be borne by students, parents and donors: bureaucratic idiocy. (Oberlin currently costs a little over \$62,000 a year, plus room, board and books.)

In 1946, W.H. Auden delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem to Harvard College’s graduating class. It ended with a “Hermetic Decalogue,” rules for humanist followers of the playful Hermes as opposed to the officious followers of Apollo. Auden’s 10 commandments begin:

*Thou shalt not do as the dean pleases,
Thou shalt not write thy doctor’s thesis
On education,
Thou shalt not worship projects nor
Shalt thou or thine bow down before
Administration.*

That’s why I’m not going back to school: illiberal deans.

Mr. Socher is editor of the Jewish Review of Books, author of “Liberal and Illiberal Arts: Essays (Mostly Jewish)” and a former professor of Jewish studies at Oberlin College.



Appeared in the September 2, 2022, print edition as 'Why I Quit Teaching at Oberlin'.