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LSMSA settles sexual harassment lawsuit with former instructor

By Lia Portillo
Editor-in-Chief

A four-year legal battle between a former instructor and the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts has ended with a \$170,000 settlement and sanctions against the school's executive director for deleting text messages related to the case.

The lawsuit alleged that a colleague sexually harassed Justin Barker and that school officials created a hostile work environment and discriminated against her based on her gender or sexual orientation before wrongfully terminating her. Although the case never went to trial, the court proceedings detailed the alleged harassment Barker faced and also revealed several other misconduct

complaints at the Natchitoches school.

The lawsuit was quietly settled last summer, according to documents obtained by The Current Sauce.

Barker, in an interview, explained that she had the students' well-being in mind while filing the lawsuit. The hardest part about her departure from LSMSA, she said, was not being able to tell the students why she had to leave.

"Probably for the first year and a half, it was hard for me to talk about having to leave and not being able to properly say goodbye to my students or have any closure," Barker said.

Court records show that Steve Horton,

the school's executive director, deleted text messages in which he instructed LSMSA employees on how to testify in depositions related to the case. Horton did not answer detailed questions about the case from The Current Sauce.

"While LSMSA cannot comment on any issues regarding personnel or students due to confidentiality policies, I can say that LSMSA is committed to maintaining a healthy, safe, and secure environment for our students, faculty, and staff," Horton wrote in an emailed statement. "The school enforces all state policies and laws prohibiting all forms of sex discrimination, including sexual harassment misconduct."

Barker began working at LSMSA in 2017 and became friends that year with Kristina Key, the school's director of academic services at the time. The friendship between Barker and Key would blur the lines of professionalism, according to the lawsuit, with Barker alleging Key began harassing her.

Their friendship began like any work-colleague relationship. Barker sought mentorship from Key, and they began to talk outside of work hours, sometimes exchanging messages late into the night. As their friendship progressed, Key would give gifts to Barker and invite her to watch movies and go on trips.

"In addition to the constant messaging on multiple mediums, Dr. Key would suggest we take trips together, make me food (telling me at one point that's how she showed she cared), and give me notes and gifts, including a magnet with a uterus drawn on it," Barker said in a court filing.

Key testified during her deposition that the magnet referred to an inside joke she had with friends at her previous employment. "These are previous relationships, friendships, and we joked among ourselves that we needed a bat signal when it was time to go for tacos," court records state.

Barker added in court responses that the affection Key showed for her was not shown to other colleagues. During an exchange with another colleague, Barker stated, "As we were talking, Dr. Key, who was standing to my left, reached around and started to play with or fix my collar. She just kept fiddling with it, and I started to become uncomfortable until she pulled her hand away."

But nearing the end of 2018, their communication would change. The attentive friendship between the two abruptly halted. "I had become increasingly more uncomfortable and worried about how Dr. Key's behaviors and interactions would affect my job, so I sent a text mes-

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Lsmsa.jpg Photo by Isabel Juarez Rubio. CAPTION: The Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts is a public residential high school on Northwestern State University of Louisiana's campus.

sage to Dr. Key asking about personal boundaries. Dr. Key’s only reply was ‘I have decided to deliberately try not to dish with you about colleagues,’” Barker said in a court filing.

By 2019, Key and Barker had a falling-out, and it became increasingly difficult for them to work together. This led to the end of their communication and dueling complaints aimed at resolving the issue.

Along with this grievance, Barker also handed LSMSA’s investigators a voluminous 400-page binder of evidence that contained screenshots of her communications with Key, including emails, text messages, Google chat, Instagram direct messages and Facebook Messenger since the beginning of Barker’s employment.

Much of the case turned on a “mediation letter” Barker received from the school and a disagreement over what that meant.

This agreement prohibited Barker from having any direct contact with Key.

Barker testified she signed the mediation agreement, thinking that was the only option she had.

Key filed her own complaint against Barker, saying in her formal grievance to LSMSA that Barker had paid close attention to her movements on campus. She also recommended Barker’s contract not be renewed. As director of academic services, Key explained in her deposition that she is in charge of meeting with department heads to discuss the renewability of faculty each year. Unlike administrators at the school, every other employee is issued a notice of renewal

or non-renewal to their contract annually by Horton.

Horton and Sheila Kidd, LSMSA’s human resources officer, would ultimately determine it was Barker who created a hostile work environment for Key. They also alleged that Barker violated confidentiality during the LSMSA complaint process, which was the reason given for her non-renewal.

Key, who continues to work at LSMSA as an instructor of English, did not respond in time for this story’s deadline.

Barker knew going up against a prestigious residential school for talented high school students would not be easy, which is why she turned to two LSMSA alumni to represent her in court.

“I knew that if I were to get anywhere ... I would have to have an alum - at least one alum - in my corner,” Barker said.

The lawsuit was filed in December 2021 by attorneys Donald Hodge and Brandy Mai, both LSMSA alumni, and Joseph Stevens.

“I love the Louisiana School. It fundamentally changed my life for the better,” Mai said in an interview. “We want the legacy to keep going.”

Mai, a 1998 LSMSA graduate, remembers how the school was a safe space for everyone, but added she was disturbed by Barker’s case, “where everything just systematically kept getting thrown under the rug.”

“The Louisiana School was a place where you could be who you were,” she said.

The depositions became a key component to the case, leading to sanctions

against LSMSA. During the depositions, Hodge and Mai questioned Kidd, Key, Horton and John Allen, LSMSA’s chief of staff at the time, about how Barker was treated by school officials.

Allen left the school after the lawsuit, but is still an instructor at the school. The Current Sauce reached out to him for comment, but he declined.

Horton, who was present in all of his employees’ depositions, was exchanging messages with Allen and Key in real time, according to court records. The next day, Hodge requested the retrieval of those messages, court records show, but Horton had deleted his previous conversations from that day. Horton stated in court documents that he routinely deletes his text messages and had deleted the first day of depositions texts before Barker’s lawyers asked to preserve them.

This led Barker’s lawyers to file a motion for sanctions - a penalty for violating court rules - after they requested Horton’s text messages to his employees, but received only one conversation. In the text messages that were provided, Horton and Allen discuss questions being asked during the depositions.

The judge ruled that the deleted texts would have shown Horton instructing LSMSA employees how to testify.

Hodge, Barker’s lead attorney, said he wants to see LSMSA administration held accountable. “I still believe LSMSA’s best days are ahead. But that future cannot be built on a foundation of silence and complicity,” he added. “LSMSA deserves leadership that reflects the very ideals it was founded to uphold.”

The Current Sauce Staff

The Current Sauce is the official student-run newspaper for Northwestern State University. The content and stories within the paper may not necessarily reflect the views of administration, faculty and staff.

Send story ideas to: thecurrentsauce@gmail.com

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF LOUISIANA SHREVEPORT DIVISION

JUSTIN BARKER,

Plaintiff,

v.

THE LOUISIANA SCHOOL FOR MATH,
SCIENCE, AND THE ARTS,

Defendant

Civil Action No.:

**COMPLAINT AND
DEMAND FOR JURY TRIAL**

The lawsuit began in 2021 and ended with a settlement in July 2024.

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Leading with purpose: A closer look at the President's Leadership Program at NSU

By Rebecca Smith
Reporter

At Northwestern State University of Louisiana, the President's Leadership Program (PLP) allows students to grow as leaders through academics, community service and meaningful projects. This spring, the program has been active with various initiatives including senior citizen, literacy programs, campus beautification and health campaigns.

Dean of Students and Vice President for the Student Experience Reatha Cox explained that PLP is aligned with the university's mission to foster student engagement and empower future leaders.

Each semester, students partake in community impact projects tailored to their interests and the needs of the local community. "Students have the freedom to focus on what matters most to them," Cox said. "These projects not only develop their leadership skills but also address genuine needs in the community."

One of PLP's standout contributions this spring was hosting the annual Red River Special Olympics held on the universi-

ty's campus. The program has been involved with the Special Olympics since 2017.

Abby Robinson, a freshman health and human performance major, and member of PLP helped plan and execute the event. Robinson was a member of this year's Special Olympics impact group.

"Knowing that I was part of something bigger than myself was rewarding in so many ways," Robinson said. "Seeing how excited the athletes were made all the hard work worth it."

Robinson emphasized the collaborative effort behind the event, which brought together PLP students, faculty, the Special Olympics board and community members. The athletes were celebrated not only for their achievements but also for their enthusiastic spirit. The event also featured activities ranging from competitive sports to a non-competitive arts festival.

Scott Maggio, a member of the Natchitoches Area Jaycees, highlighted the

importance of their \$500 donation that funded participation ribbons for the athletes. The Natchitoches Area Jaycees is a group of young professionals committed to community service, leadership development and organizing local events. They aim to make a positive impact in the Natchitoches area while fostering personal and professional growth.

"These athletes want to be treated like any other athletes," Maggio said. "The memories and excitement they experience go far beyond any single donation."

Maggio shared that witnessing the joy on athletes' faces and the pride of their families during the Special Olympics is among the most memorable moments for the Jaycees. "For one day a year, these athletes are in the spotlight, living out their dreams like superstars," he said. "We're fortunate to be their biggest cheerleaders."

Robinson reflected on her personal growth and on a key lesson she learned from PLP's Jelly Bean Project, which emphasized the value of time and making

the most of every day.

"It puts into perspective how I need to make the most of every day because every day is a gift," she said.

The friendships that Robinson formed and the leadership skills she gained have made her time in the program unforgettable.

"I've been given so many opportunities and experiences because of this program," she said.

PLP continues to shape student leaders while making a difference in the Natchitoches community.

By bringing students, faculty and community partners together, PLP creates opportunities to foster inclusion, tackle community challenges and cultivate leadership that leaves a lasting impact. As the spring semester continues, the PLP is a testament, for NSU students and the Natchitoches community alike, that leadership is about serving others and creating a legacy of positive change.



Photos by Lia Portillo.
Every spring semester, the President's Leadership Program hosts their annual Special Olympics games.

NSU basketball teams show resilience in Southland Conference Championship tournament

By Rebecca Smith
Reporter

The men's and women's basketball teams at Northwestern State University of Louisiana demonstrated determination and growth during their respective runs in the 2025 Southland Conference Championship playoffs in Lake Charles.

In the semifinal against McNeese State University, the men's team clawed back from a 19-point deficit, narrowing the gap to just five in the second half. Although the comeback ultimately fell short, their effort highlighted a team that thrives under pressure.

"It wasn't necessarily anything I did," Rick Cabrera, men's basketball head coach, said. "Most importantly, our guys took a deep breath and relaxed and just enjoyed the game that they play."

Senior forward JT Warren reflected on the team's resilience during the match-up. "We kept talking to each other. We're a very confident team and believe we can beat anybody in this conference," Warren said. Cabrera said that Warren led the charge with 19 points and three steals, earning praise as "one of the better guards in this league."

Another standout was Gerald Colonel, who added 12 points and six rebounds. Cabrera described Colonel as "our anchor defensively" and "phenomenal for us" throughout the season.

Despite McNeese's stellar three-point shooting - 27 threes across their meetings this season - Cabrera commended his team for giving their best effort against a talented opponent. "At the end of the day, it's the talent and ability of the individual," Cabrera said.

The women's team achieved a significant milestone by advancing past the first round of the tournament for the first time in several years. Their performance was fueled by teamwork and support from their fans.

"I feel proud of the team's performance," Jasmin Dixon, a graduate forward, said. "Looking out into the crowd and seeing our amazing fans, band and cheerleaders cheering us on, their support meant everything."

Dixon reflected on a pivotal moment in the tournament when the team advanced to the next round. "That really boosted our confidence and made us feel like we could take on any challenge," she said.

Her evolution as a team captain symbol-



Photos by Lalaina Wood.

Every spring semester, the President's Leadership Program hosts their annual Special Olympics games.

ized the growth of the team as a whole. "I've learned how crucial communication is and how to be a supportive teammate, which has helped me grow both personally and athletically," she said.

Both teams left the tournament with valuable lessons. Cabrera emphasized pride in the team's journey and looks forward to next year. "We look forward to being there next year and holding up a trophy," he said.

Similarly, Dixon expressed optimism about the team's potential. "What excites me most about the team's potential moving forward is our strong foundation and the talent we have," she said.

Graduate student Sharna Ayres also shared her perspective on the women's team's remarkable season. Ayres, who is majoring in health and human performance and sports administration, expressed gratitude for being part of a sports culture that allowed her to grow both on and off the court.

"I think staying within the sports culture, you know, everyone that works in this department or even just within the facilities, it was good really working alongside them," Ayres said. "With my internship, it's good to see what they do on the other side of sports, instead of just playing the sports."

She also reflected on the emotions of competing in the Southland Conference Championships. "It was cool. We never made it past the first game in the tournament before, and that was our goal this year," Ayres said. "It was very emotional, being my last season, but fun to be there and fun to be with my teammates."

As a leader on the team, Ayres recognized her role in guiding younger teammates. "Our team was very young this year, with a lot of freshmen. I had to show them what's right from wrong, the work ethic, and the standard our coach expects," she said.

Looking ahead, Ayres hopes to leave a legacy characterized by her 3-point shooting and her kindness toward everyone she encounters. "I feel like treating everyone with kindness is a big thing for me," she said.

Both teams ended their 2024-2025 seasons with a 16-16 overall record. While neither team secured the championship trophy this year, their playoff performances showcased NSU's competitive spirit and promise for the seasons ahead.



The program has been involved with the Special Olympics since 2017.

Will Vic the Demon ever really go away?

By Nina Ovalle
Viewpoints Editor



Illustration by Stephani Bradley.
Will Victory the Demon be replaced by a new mascot?

In honor of April Fools day, the Northwestern State University of Louisiana Student Government Association posted a prank resolution that proposed the retirement of the Demons mascot and the adoption of the Northwestern State Meat Pies as the new face of the university.

While this was only in good fun, it brings a new question to mind: Can the NSU mascot, Victory the Demon, actually be changed without the involvement of students? After all, Vic was created by the involvement of the student body.

According to NSU Traditions, in 1923, Vic the Demon was originally introduced through an open contest to submit ideas for a university mascot for NSU. Students and faculty of NSU suggested several ideas with the popular vote ruling between the Braves or the Demons. A committee formed by the president of the university at the time then narrowed

down the options to officially name all NSU athletic teams as the Demons.

The mascot contests then continued in 1984, in order to select a name for the NSU Demon mascot. According to NSU Traditions, over 300 entries from students and faculty were submitted. Ray Carney, alumnus of NSU, won with his entry that was short for the word "Victory": Vic the Demon.

With Vic the Demon having such an extensive and deep rooted history at NSU, can he ever really go away? Could we really lose our beloved Vic? While I personally believe the possibility is unlikely and saddening, the true answer is yes.

For example, several universities went through a mascot change outside of their own volition following the implementation of a new policy by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA).

The policy, which took effect on Feb. 1, 2006, prohibited colleges or universities with "hostile and abusive racial/ethnic/national origin mascots, nicknames or imagery" from taking part in any NCAA championship competitions, according to NCAA. The NCAA strongly advised within this policy that no universities use Native American imagery of any kind.

According to the policy, it specifically identified 18 universities across the United States which would be directly affected including Alcorn State University (Braves), Central Michigan University (Chippewas), Catawba College (Indians), Florida State University (Seminoles), Midwestern State University (Indians), University of Utah (Utes), Indiana University-Pennsylvania (Indians), Carthage College (Redmen), Bradley University (Braves), Arkansas State University (Indians), Chowan College (Braves), University of Illinois-Champaign (Illini), University of Louisiana-Monroe (Indi-

ans), McMurry University (Indians), Mississippi College (Choctaws), Newberry College (Indians), University of North Dakota (Fighting Sioux) and Southeastern Oklahoma State University (Savages).

Therefore, without the input of the student body, for the benefit of each of these school's athletic teams, their mascots were all changed. While these examples are under an entirely different circumstance, as Vic the Demon is not offensive or hostile toward an entire ethnicity of people, the principle still stands that any university mascot can be forcibly changed.