

# NETCHERT, DINEEN & HILLMANN, ESQS.

294 Harrington Avenue • Suite 3  
Closter, New Jersey 07624

William J. Netchert  
John R. Dineen \*  
Michael J. Hillmann (RETIRED)

Joseph T. Ryan ‡  
OF COUNSEL

Esther H. Bodek  
Karyn C. Lusskin

(201) 784-1046  
FAX (201) 784-0236

HUDSON COUNTY OFFICE:  
Baldwin Professional Center  
280 Baldwin Avenue  
Jersey City, New Jersey 07306  
(201) 656-3000

Please respond to Closter

\* Member of the NJ and NY Bar  
‡ Certified Civil Trial Attorney

July 2, 2020

Amy Lin-Rodriguez, Superintendent  
Hudson County Schools of Technology  
One High-Tech Way  
Secaucus, New Jersey 07094

Re: Yearbook/Hate Symbol

Dear Ms. Lin-Rodriguez:

Please be advised that I have been asked to review the HIB/hate symbol investigation of Linda DiGiacomo in connection with the appearance of the number "88" in this years yearbook which has already been distributed.

The genesis of the issue revolves around the number "88" in association with one of the graduating seniors. It was pointed out by way of email that this symbol "88" is referred to by White Supremacists as an identification logo for their beliefs. To be sure, the Internet provides guidance that in the subculture of white supremacy, sometimes this symbol is referred to.

As soon as it came to the attention of the District that such a subliminal symbol of hate had existed in the yearbook, the HIB coordinator, Linda DiGiacomo was tasked with investigating the origin of the symbol and the attendant mindset of the student involved.

Through investigation, Ms. DiGiacomo determined that there is a yearbook moderator, a teacher, responsible for vetting the yearbook for inappropriate language, symbols or comments. History has taught us that the moderator is necessary because at the time students use the yearbook as an opportunity to "prank" their classmates. After a review by the teacher moderator, the yearbook draft is circulated among 11 students whose sole purpose is to further vet the entirety of the yearbook to identify sub- cultural inclusions which might appear benign

but in the colloquial community of the high school carry a different and inappropriate message. This process was performed this year like years in the past and the identity of the symbol “88” was not flagged as inappropriate. This Protocol, that was put in place, is designed to ferret out inappropriate messages from the yearbook and as in the past, revisions had been made to the draft, excising that which was determined to be inappropriate.

The symbol “88” can be a sub- cultural reference to white supremacy when viewed in the context and setting of its use. A review of the Anti-Defamation League’s investigation into extremist groups identified approximately 241, symbols, numbers and acronyms that in context are hateful and inappropriate expressions. However, while the swastika sign or burning crosses are patently hateful, many other symbols have been hijacked by sub- cultural groups for their own branding. It is alarming how ignorant and unaware the average individual in Hudson County would be of some of these misbranded symbols. How then was the “88” never flagged and identified as a symbol that should have been addressed. The yearbook itself was vetted by a teacher as well as 11 individual students whose community sentiment did not discern the significance of the symbol. The reason stems from the fact that the symbol was not pervasively known in the community of students and teachers as a representation of inappropriate content. These symbols must be viewed in the context of the community in which they appear and the generalized understanding of the reader.

Other symbols within this paper may also be significant to groups or individuals, who are not extreme or racist. Where possible the information caption will describe the original meaning. However, it should be noted that the symbols may have multiple interpretations to different groups and it may not be possible to relay every single possible meaning of a particular symbol. For these reason, all of the symbols depicted here must be evaluated in the context in which they are used.

Cited from Internet, Northwest Counter Terrorism Unit, UK Extreme Right Wing symbols, numbers and acronyms

<https://beta.trafford.gov.uk/residents/community/community-safety/docs/extreme-right-wing-symbols.pdf>

A review of data available on the Internet fails to reveal that Hudson County is identified as a hot bed of White Supremacists. That is not to suggest that there are no ideologues who support such ideals in the community, but it does suggest that their presence and branding is not universally known or regarded. Geographically, such presence and branding may easily be identified. For example, in hot bed of White Supremacist areas throughout the country the symbol “88” might readily be identified by the general population as unacceptable but the same is not true for every portion of the country. The context of its intent is extremely important in conveying its meaning.

The investigation involved the interview of students who expressed concern with regard

to this incident. The greater majority of people canvassed were unaware of the consequence of this symbol. Furthermore, as often is the case in a high school setting, if the content was intended for its hateful purpose, the “whispering walls” would have brought to the attention of some of the students over the five-month period during the vetting process that attendant inappropriate symbols would appear. No such sub-current of student informed knowledge has been revealed.

The student who advanced the moniker was interviewed. Although he graduated, he is still a minor. He was shocked and in dismay that that symbol could be misinterpreted from his intent. He was wholly unaware until the issue was brought to his attention that the symbol could have other meaning. A review of his record has revealed that there have been no attendant disciplinary or similar incidents with the student during his tenure at the high school. Academically he is recognized as a good student and generally well regarded by his peers and his teachers. What is readily verifiable is that his explanation of his intention was to reference for his North Bergen colleagues the park which they all hung out in growing up, 88<sup>th</sup> St., Park. In the North Bergen parlance “88” is a reference to that park and has been for many years. It is apparent that his intent and his message were both pure and without malice and unfortunately its dual infamy in the subculture of White Supremacists has hijacked his character and good name.

What we must recognize is that the Hudson County Schools of Technology on all levels rejects hate and bias in its community. To that end there are those who have been offended by the symbol and moving forward we must be vigilant in identifying and removing acts and symbols of hate that may present themselves in the future. This unfortunate event has produced division in the community and more regrettably scarred the young man associated with the event. Perhaps as you have suggested a progressive new task force of students, community members and faculty members should be assembled to continue the community inclusiveness of The Hudson County Schools of Technology and provide guidance for sensitivity to the community in the future.

Should you have any questions in this regard, please contact me.

Very truly yours,



John R Dineen  
JR D/NTM

Cc Joseph M Muniz/Board Secretary

Craig Guy/Board President