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Teen Questions Suspension, Alleges Racism By Principal

By VICTOR EPSTEIN
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STATESBORO — Crystal Kicklighter, 16 and six months pregnant, ran a hand over her belly last week as she pondered an uncertain future.

She was suspended from Claxton High School on the third day of class, Sept. 28, allegedly for talking back to a teacher and said she has not been allowed to return.

The Claxton native and her family said the suspension is part of a campaign of harassment intended to drive her from school

because Eugene Burney, the father of her unborn son, is black.

"I don't think they have any right to deny me an education because I'm going out with Eugene," Crystal said. "And I'm going to keep going out with Eugene — I love him."

Claxton High School Principal Dewey Hulsey and other school officials won't discuss the matter in detail but insist it has nothing to do with race. But several students said Hulsey repeatedly has barred interracial couples from the school prom and from other

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ALLEGING HARASSMENT: From left, Becky Williams, Harold Kicklighter, his daughter Crystal and wife Jean believe Crystal is being targeted because she is pregnant by a black man.

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Teen

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forms of interaction, such as holding hands.

Crystal's parents, Jean and Harold Kicklighter said many older whites in Claxton, a conservative community of 2,700, believe the only thing worse than being a black man is to be pregnant by one.

"I thought they'd let her back in after she finished the five-day suspension," Jean Kicklighter said, "but now it looks like they'll never let her back in."

She said Hulsey and other teachers ordered her and Eugene Burney to break up or face the consequences after it was learned they were dating last year.

Hulsey, she said, told her "I've got word that you're seeing Eugene Burney . . . I don't think we want to cause any confusion in this school by you mixing. It's like this, you're on one pole and Eugene's on the other pole."

Crystal also said the principal told her that blacks are "down in statistics as not being normal people" and that if it was up to him, he would "put the black people on a ship and send them back to Africa, right where they came from."

Burney said Hulsey also told him interracial dating was not allowed at Claxton High School, which still has separate black and white student governments and separate homecoming kings and queens. The 19-year-old said he got his first warning in 10th grade.

"I asked him 'where in the (student) handbook does it say a black and white couple cannot be together,' Burney said. "He said it wasn't in the student handbook, it was in his handbook."

Burney, who graduated in June and plans to attend Middle Georgia College, said Hulsey told him to **break off his relationship with Crystal** in May.

"He told me that we weren't to hold hands or even be seen together anywhere on school grounds," Burney said. "I got mad and I told him that he couldn't tell me who I could and couldn't see and he told me 'not in my school.'"

Evans County School Superintendent Durell Lynn said Wednesday that race had nothing to do with Crystal's suspension, now entering its third month. He said Crystal is free to return to classes, but has chosen not to do so.

"I talked with her parents and she was given options like any other

students, including attending alternative schools, provided she meets the stipulations given her by the principal," said Lynn, who declined to reveal the stipulations. "But we've heard nothing from her."

However, Jean Kicklighter said Lynn told her Crystal was not even allowed on school property the last time she met with him.

Crystal said when she tried to return to class at the end of her five-day suspension, Oct. 6, Hulsey had her escorted from the building by Claxton police. Hulsey said that was because she had not first met with Lynn and refused to leave the classroom.

Hulsey declined to discuss the cause of Crystal's initial 5-day suspension, adding that he legally is required to keep such information confidential.

Harold Kicklighter, a self-described "good old boy," said Crystal's pregnancy hurt him badly and he initially disowned her, prompting a brief separation from his wife. But Kicklighter said Hulsey made the decision to support his youngest child easier by ordering police to force a visibly pregnant Crystal

from the school that his taxes helped to build.

"The truth is that if this was someone else's daughter I don't know if I would be against it, but when I heard what he said to her and what he done I was of a mind to give him that there," Harold Kicklighter said, shaking his fist. "He's got no business telling my daughter who she can go out with; that's my job."

Hulsey would not respond specifically to Crystal's claims concerning his alleged statements but, like Lynn, said race is not the issue.

Hulsey said there is no written policy against interracial couples at Claxton High School, but noted that none have chosen to attend its prom in the 21 years he has been principal. He also indicated he has the authority to break up any situation that poses a safety problem, including mixed couples, should they create tension among other students.

Hulsey and Lynn used a similar rationale in May to justify banning Malcom-X and Confederate battle flag T-shirts from school grounds.

The NAACP, ACLU and Sons of Confederate Veterans ridiculed their claim that the symbols posed a public safety hazard and accused the school system of running roughshod over students' constitutional rights to freedom of speech and expression.

"We reserve the right to bar anything that is causing a disruption in the school," Hulsey said. "Race has nothing to do with it."

Crystal said she wants to finish her education, but has no intention of dropping out of school or breaking up with Burney.

Crystal said she and Burney have joked about marriage, but are not sure what they plan to do. For now, she said, they just want to be together "like any other couple."

"I've been working harder in school and doing better since I met Eugene and I really want to get an education now," she said, noting that she has struggled academically in the past. "That's why it bothers me that now that I'm finally ready to learn I can't get into school."

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