

Christian Coach Sues Over Dismissal by Muslim Principal

A veteran high school coach in Michigan has filed a federal lawsuit claiming he was fired by a Muslim principal because of his Christian faith and his association with a Pentecostal minister who helped lead a Muslim student to Christ.

In a lawsuit filed Monday, Gerald Marszalek, a wrestling coach for 35 years at Fordson High School in Dearborn, accused Dearborn schools and Fordson Principal Imad Fadlallah of violating his constitutional rights to free speech and exercise of religion, as well as Michigan laws against religious discrimination.

Attorneys from the Thomas More Law Center, which is representing Marszalek, claim the coach's contract was not renewed last year because of his association with an Assemblies of God pastor known for evangelizing the area's large Muslim community.

"We are getting a glimpse of what happens when Muslims who refuse to accept American values and principles gain political power in an American community," said Richard Thompson, Thomas More president and chief counsel. "Failure to renew coach Marszalek's contract had nothing to do with wrestling and everything to do with religion."

According to the lawsuit, in 2005 Trey Hancock, pastor of Dearborn Assembly of God and a volunteer assistant wrestling coach, baptized a Muslim student who accepted Christ during a summer wrestling camp not affiliated with the school.

It claims that after Fadlallah learned of the student's conversion, he ordered that Hancock be removed as an assistant coach and later told Marszalek to keep him away from wrestling practices and events. Marszalek says it was impossible to keep

Hancock away from the school because his son was a student and a member of the wrestling team.

The lawsuit says Fadlallah accused Hancock of wanting to evangelize at the school, where 80 percent of students are of Arab descent and many are Muslim.

Hancock told the Detroit Free Press last year that he never mixed his faith with sports. Thomas More attorneys said the student Hancock baptized is a friend of his son's who had been attending Dearborn Assembly for two years before he embraced Christianity.

Marszalek also said Hancock never used his assistant coaching position to proselytize. "He knew the difference between church and state," Marszalek told the Free Press last year.

Marszalek's lawsuit claims Fadlallah has repeatedly given preference to Islamic practices, allowing Muslim student athletes to recite Muslim prayers before, during and after school-sanctioned athletic events. The suit also alleges that Fadlallah hit the student who converted to Christianity and told him he had disgraced his family.

The Dearborn Public Schools Board of Education found Fadlallah, who is Fordson's first Muslim principal, innocent of that charge in late May.

According to Arab-American News, Fadlallah's supporters blame the controversy on a few Fordson staff members who want him to leave the school and "an outside group of Christian evangelizers who proudly boast about converting Muslim students."

Thomas More attorney and spokesman Brian Rooney said the school board exonerated Fadlallah because some witnesses changed their stories. He said his firm has witnesses who are willing to testify that they saw Fadlallah hit the student.

"We feel very confident that this in fact did happen," Rooney said. "A lot of pressure was brought to bear on this boy."

Dearborn's Muslim community has accused Hancock, who is listed as a home missionary for "intercultural ministries" by the Assemblies of God Michigan District, of targeting youth with overzealous evangelism tactics.

In 2007 a Muslim father filed a lawsuit claiming the Michigan Department of Human Services and Hancock's church were conspiring to keep his 13-year-old daughter from practicing Islam.

Hancock said the dispute was part of a larger custody battle in a divorce case in which the girl's mother came to the church complaining that her husband abused her. He said the situation had nothing to do with the wrestling team or the school.

Rooney said Marszalek's case highlights a double standard regarding Islam that is growing more common nationwide.

"With Christianity you have this sense that there's the separation of church and state," Rooney told Charisma. "But when it comes to Islam the notion is this isn't necessarily the separation of church and state because we want to encourage inclusion and multiculturalism. That's a double standard. If you're going to hold Christians' feet to the fire, you should hold everyone's feet to the fire."

Marszalek is seeking his back pay, injunctive and declaratory relief, damages and to be reinstated as coach of the wrestling team.