



Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics & Public Trust
Investigative Report

**CASE
CLOSED**

Investigator: Robert Steinback
Complainant: Joan Tamen
Date Opened: April 12, 2018

Case No.: PI18-17

Subject Name: Audrey Edmonson

Date Submitted: March 27, 2019

3/28/19

Allegation(s):

Joan Tamen (Tamen), contacted the Ethics Commission and alleged that the granddaughter of Miami-Dade County Commissioner Audrey Edmonson (Edmonson), was the Statewide middle-school winner of the 2018 Black History Essay Contest run by the office of Governor Rick Scott, earning her a four-year scholarship to a Florida state university. Tamen's son also submitted an essay for the contest but was not among the 10 finalists. Tamen alleged that Edmonson's granddaughter won because Edmonson improperly influenced the process.

Relevant Law:

Miami-Dade Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics ordinance Section 2-11.1 (g): Exploitation of official position prohibited. *No person [covered by this section] shall use or attempt to use his or her official position to secure special privileges or exemptions for himself or herself or others except as may be specifically permitted by other ordinances and resolutions previously ordained or adopted or hereafter to be ordained or adopted by the Board of County Commissioners.*

Investigation:

Complainant Tamen, is the Miami-Dade mother of a middle school son who submitted a 500-word essay for the 2018 Florida Black History Month contest conducted by the office of then-Governor Rick Scott. The winner of the statewide contest stood to receive a full four-year scholarship to a Florida State university.

Though Tamen believed her son had submitted a competitive essay, he did not finish among the top 10 finalists. She was told that his essay score was 19, and that the winner's essay received a perfect 20 [the finalists were judged on a 40-point rubric]. Seeking to learn more about the winning essay and compare it to her son's, Tamen submitted public records requests to the contest organizers, seeking among other things an accounting of the errors her son's essay contained, and for a copy of the winning essay.

Tamen, who advised that she has a journalism degree, reviewed the winning essay she concluded that it contained 10 grammatical errors in it including five in the first paragraph alone.

Tamen subsequently discovered that the winner in the middle school category, was the granddaughter of Miami-Dade Commissioner Audrey Edmonson, and the daughter of two Miami-Dade School District principals. Tamen became suspicious that the outcome of the contest had been predetermined and possibly influenced by Commissioner Edmonson.

A COE investigator spoke on several occasions with the complainant Tamen and received numerous documents from her including copies of her e-mail exchanges with State contest officials.

The investigator requested and received copies of the essays of the 10 middle-school finalists, including the winning essay and reviewed a copy of Tamen's son's essay.

Florida Department of Education representative Cheryl Etters (Etters) initially responded to Tamen's public records requests. On April 6, 2018, Etters described the essay evaluation procedure to Tamen: "Employees with the Florida Department of Education and Florida Department of State serve as the judges for the first review of essays. The readers, many of which [sic] are former teachers and are currently librarians, review the essays using the scoring rubric and give a score. The top scoring essays are reviewed a second time by readers who did not participate in the first round, and the top ten essays in each grade grouping are chosen. The top ten essays in each grade grouping are read a third time and ranked by staff with Volunteer Florida and Florida Prepaid. The final selection is made by staff in the Governor's office."

The COE investigator contacted Etters, but after her initial response acknowledging receipt of the investigator's public records request, DOE Deputy Counsel Brent McNeal interceded and asked that all further correspondence be directed to him.

Etters and McNeal provided a slate of materials, which, aside from the essays and scoresheets for the 10 middle-school finalists, consisted mostly of widely available publicity documents for the contest. Subsequent questions by the investigator seeking more pertinent information about internal contest procedures went unanswered, and were finally blocked by McNeal, who sent an e-mail on September 5, 2018, stating, "The Department of Education has no further comments about the records that have been produced." McNeal did respond to a subsequent public records request in March 2019.

The state officials released the scoresheets of three finalist judges, two for Volunteer Florida (who scored five essays each) and one for Florida Prepaid (who scored all 10 essays). Savannah Kelly (Kelly) of Volunteer Florida gave the winning essay a score of 37 based on a 40-point rubric; she gave 37 to another contestant, with the next highest score being 35. Natalie Lazano (Lazano) of Volunteer Florida didn't rate the winning essay, but gave another contestant, a score of 38, with the next highest score being 32.

The third evaluator, identified only as Casey with Florida Prepaid, gave the winning essay a 37, with the next highest score among the nine other essays being 34.

Thus, the winning essay a combined score of $37+37=74$, the highest among the finalists. The next highest combined score was, $38+30=68$.

As the jurisdiction of the COE does not extend to State officials, the investigator continued the investigation only to determine if Edmonson or anyone on her behalf might have influenced the selection of the contest organizers toward her granddaughter.

In addition to their essays, the contest asked applicants to provide a letter of recommendation from a teacher, principal or coach, or a professional in the community, and a personal 200-word essay

by the student describing his or her plans for the future or recent activities to give back to the community. The investigation was unable to determine the relative weight these additional submissions had on the outcome of the contest.

In the case of the winning essay, neither the personal essay nor the community leader recommendation – provided by the then principal of Miami Lakes Middle School, made any reference to the student's relations in Miami-Dade County. Both scorers Kelly and Lazano stated in interviews that they did not know of any relations the winner had and that no one had attempted to influence their scoring.

Interviews

Savannah Kelly and Natalie Lazano


By way of subpoena, the investigator was able to conduct telephone interviews with two evaluators of the middle school essay finalists, Natalie Lazano and Savannah Kelly, who work with Volunteer Florida. Each stated in telephone interviews that no one had exerted pressure on or attempted to influence their scoring. They stated that their only role was to read the finalists' essays (five each). They stated they were not involved in any other aspect of choosing the ultimate winner. They stated that they did not know who the ultimate winner's relations were in Miami-Dade County, and that no one contacted them with an intent to influence their scoring.

Documents/Exhibit Review:

- Florida Black History Month 20108 official rules and guidelines.
- Joan Tamen's Public Records request, with responses
- 2018 Black History Month Essay sign-out sheet, grades 6-8. This document shows how many essays were reviewed by which Department of Education staffers in the early rounds.

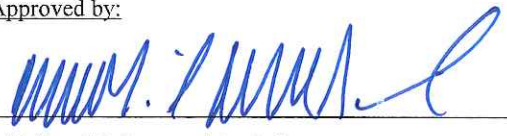
Conclusion:

The inquiry into Ms. Tamen's allegations was unable to identify any evidence that supports the allegation of influence or deliberate unfairness in the 2018 Black History Month Essay Contest. Accordingly, this matter is closed with no further action.



COE Investigator Robert Steinback

Approved by:



Michael Murawski, Advocate

 3/28/19

José Arrojo, Executive Director

