

DREADLOCKS

Cheshire Inn apologizes over ban on dreadlocks

*The inn's manager has resigned, and the establishment is dropping the policy.

The general manager and president of the Cheshire Inn has resigned and apologized following accusations of racism for refusing to allow two men in dreadlocks to enter the establishment.

Additionally, company officials said they would not ban patrons because of dreadlocks and would require their 40 employees to undergo sensitivity training to prevent similar racially charged events in the future.

The apologies followed a meeting with two activists who had threatened to picket the facility on Father's Day.

John E. "Jack" Lueders, who has headed the company that runs the Cheshire Inn for over 10 years, resigned Thursday and turned L&S Properties over to his son and his daughter-in-law, Gina Lueders. Gina Lueders is now the general manager and president of the company. She said her father-in-law was no longer connected to the company in any capacity.

In a prepared statement, Lueders apologized to the two men, Brian Williams and Shelby Carter, who said they were told they could not enter the bar for a postwedding celebration last month. The two wear their hair in dreadlocks, a hairstyle predominately worn by African-Americans.

"I wish to apologize to the two gentlemen that were denied entry to the bar on May 17th and to anyone offended by my uniformed and inappropriate remarks regarding the incident that occurred at the Cheshire Inn," Jack Lueders said. "I sincerely hope that my apology will be accepted and will help heal the wounds I have caused in the community."

Gina Lueders said that other members of the family-owned business felt it imperative that Jack Lueders step down following his comments regarding dreadlocks and the incident.

"His remarks made the company appear that it is racist, when it isn't," she said.

Gina Lueders, who said she made the decision to bar the two men from the property, also apologized in a letter to the Rev. Phillip Duvall, an official with the local NAACP, and to activist Anthony Shahid.

She and David Apted, owner of the Cheshire Inn, the Cheshire Lodge, the Cheshire Wine Gardens and the Fox & Hounds bar, met with Shahid and Duvall Thursday evening to discuss the incident Shahid and Duvall had threatened to picket the facility on Sunday.

“I would like to apologize to everyone that was hurt by the comments and actions of my former boss,” she said, “And I pray that his actions will be forgiven, so that we as a community, can grow to become united. I am an honest person and have never judged a person by their looks.”

Carter said he did not want to comment on the apology just yet. He and Williams are still considering their options in response to the incident.

When questioned about the incident last week, John Lueders told a Post-Dispatch reporter in a tape-recorded interview that the inn had a policy of excluding people with dreadlocks if their hair was determined to be “dirty and stinky.”

“You can’t wash that hair, and it stinks, and we’re a crowded bar, and we don’t want stinky people in the bar,” he said in the interview.

Gina Lueders maintains that the inn never had a policy against such hair. She said the incident began because an employee was concerned about the length of their hair. By the time she arrived on the scene, the two men were using obscene language, and she barred them from the facility.

Still, she said she wished she could change how the incident was handled.

“If we could go back and start this over, I wish none of this would have happened,” she said. “I think that’s where the sensitivity training is going to come into play. I am very hurt that people feel I’m a racist. I would say that 60 percent of my banquets are with the black community and I don’t want them to be hurt by thinking that I’m a racist.”

Since the incident occurred with Carter and Williams, the inn has allowed people with dreadlocks to the facility.

Apted, who leases the Cheshire Inn to the Lueders, said he felt the family was trying earnestly “to right the wrong.”

“I think that Ms. Lueders did all she could to tell Mr. Shahid that they knew they had made a mistake and that they wanted to rectify it,” Apted said. “I think they are trying to do the right thing.”

Apted said all of the properties associated with the Cheshire name have been affected by the incident. He said a largely white group of between 60 to 100 people canceled an event because of the publicity. Another couple has canceled their hotel

rooms and are trying to cancel a wedding reception. The hotel has been getting phone calls from people asking about its policies.

“It’s been difficult for our employees,” he said.