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### Judge and Wife Allege Harassment by Minneapolis Police

POSTED ON APRIL 07, 2008 BY CHARLES RAMSAY

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By Paul Demko

MPD blues: James and Lois Cannon want an apology from the cops

Image by Craig Lassig

Around 10 p.m. on September 5, 2006, James Cannon, his wife Lois, and their 22-year-old son, James Jr., climbed into the family's PT Cruiser and drove to the Wrecker Services impound lot in downtown Minneapolis. Earlier in the day, their son's car, a green Ford Contour, had been towed for being parked illegally in the West Bank neighborhood.

At the impound lot office, a cramped space with all the charm of a prison visiting room, the Cannons forked over \$250 and waited for the car. After about 15 minutes, the African American family was joined by a quartet of African immigrants whose vehicles had likewise been seized. They too paid their fines and awaited their cars.

Then the group was informed by the dispatcher that one of the company's tow trucks had broken down, and that the other driver was out on a run. Everybody would just have to sit tight.

After half an hour, one of the immigrants grew agitated. He twice banged on the Plexiglas enclosing the tow-truck dispatcher.

A few minutes later, a Minneapolis Police Department squad car arrived on the scene. A pair of cops entered the waiting area and disappeared into the dispatcher's office. When the officers emerged, the relatively low-key scene changed dramatically.

The white female officer, Julie Casper, immediately began yelling at the group of predominantly middle-aged black folks. "The next person to touch the Plexiglas, swear, or raise their voice will go to jail for disorderly conduct," Casper

purportedly bellowed at the group. "I want you all to shut up and behave yourselves."

The Cannons were taken aback by the hostility. Lois attempted to make the case that it wasn't necessary for the officer to use such a belligerent tone. The response from Officer Casper: "I will use whatever tone I damn well please."

James attempted to intervene, explaining to the officer that they'd been waiting for close to an hour. This tack didn't work either. "I don't care if you've been waiting four days," the officer yelled back.

At this point the Cannons decided to leave. Lois wrote down the female officer's badge number and informed her that they'd be filing a complaint regarding her conduct.

"It was very intimidating," recalls Lois. "It was like out of a movie. To the point where you didn't feel safe being in that room with her doing what she was doing."

As the Cannons prepared to drive out of the Wrecker Services lot, the white male officer, Michael Meath, made a show of writing down the family's license plate number. The Cannons viewed this as a not-so-subtle threat.

"There was no reason for him to take our license plate," James says. "It wasn't our vehicle that had been impounded. We hadn't done anything wrong except to say we were going to go file a complaint."

Which they did. The family drove directly to the First Precinct police station in downtown Minneapolis and related their concerns to the sergeant on duty. They then filed a complaint with the city's civil rights department alleging that they'd been the victims of discriminatory treatment by the cops. They filed a similar grievance with the Minneapolis Civilian Review Authority (CRA).

This incident might have been just a footnote in the long chronicle of unfriendly interactions between the MPD and the city's black residents, but in this instance, the cops picked on the wrong family. James Cannon is a 56-year-old judge with the Office of Administrative Hearings and a retired Army lieutenant colonel. He also spent a decade serving on the city's Civil Rights Commission. His wife is a registered nurse and midwife. Their son is a student at the University of Minnesota.

"I just can't see her talking to a small group of mostly middle-aged, older white people and yelling and screaming at them like that," says James, a courtly man with a head of gray hair and a neatly trimmed moustache. "If a police officer acts like this in a non-threatening, non-hostile situation, what is she going to do in a real hostile situation? Draw her gun unnecessarily?"

In responding to the complaint, Officer Casper told an investigator with the city's civil rights department that she believed the harsh tone was necessary to control the crowd at the impound lot. But James Cannon bristles at this excuse. "I guess more than two black people constitutes a crowd," he says. "We weren't yelling and screaming. There was nothing to control."

In January, the civil rights department determined that probable cause existed that both officers had acted in a discriminatory manner. The two sides are now in a conciliation period, in which they'll try to reach an agreement on remedies. The Cannons are seeking a written apology from both officers, as well as a note from Police Chief Tim Dolan acknowledging that their conduct was out of line. The Cannons also want a letter of reprimand placed in each officer's personnel file and unspecified monetary damages. (The MPD did not return phone calls seeking comment.)

If the MPD isn't willing to take those actions, the Cannons may file a civil rights lawsuit. "We're not trying to make a federal case out of this," James says. "But we're going to see it through to the end because we feel that strongly about it."

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