

# A not-so-secret HR report called the CAC 'toxic.' What happened next?

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By Chelsea Brasted | Posted March 25, 2019 at 12:00 PM | Updated March 25, 2019 at 02:44 PM

MK Wegmann knew the document should be kept secret.

The interim executive director of the [Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans](#) takes privacy seriously when it comes to internal human resources documents. And she knew this one, a report compiled by a contracted HR firm to determine the “root cause” of recent staff turnover, required particular discretion.

It’s why, when Wegmann met with the CAC’s Board of Trustees about the report in the late fall of 2018, she printed out copies on goldenrod paper, numbered each one, and picked up each copy when the meeting was over, bringing them back home to store safely.

It didn’t matter. Within weeks, the document had leaked, landing anonymously on Christmas Eve in the email inboxes of former board members, former CAC staffers and others. One copy was sent to NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. Sources have confirmed the report sent to the news organization was the same one produced for the CAC. Wegmann, while not formally vouching for it, does not dispute its authenticity.

The report contained detailed allegations from interviews with current and former staffers characterizing the nonprofit art museum’s work environment as “uncomfortable,” “cringe worthy,” “hostile” and “toxic.” One former staffer “even claims to have PTSD,” it read.

Adding to the intrigue was the report’s timing: It was anonymously circulated in the wake of CAC executive director [Neil Barclay’s resignation](#). It describes the organization as one plagued by institutional racism that manifested in an organized effort to force Barclay out. And it has contributed to a growing perception of the CAC as a major New Orleans cultural institution in a state of disrepair.

Barclay declined to comment for this story.

Wegmann said one person had been fired as a result of information contained in the scathing report, but declined to name the individual or the issues that prompted the dismissal. She and three CAC Board of Trustees members interviewed last week seemed less concerned about the allegations contained in the report than the fact that it had been “stolen” and widely disseminated.

“Any actions I would have taken or have taken are confidential,” Wegmann said. “Personnel matters are confidential as well. If we can’t respect that as an organization, where are our ethics and values?”

## **Rich history, rocky recent past**

The CAC was founded after a 1976 Faubourg Marigny art exhibition turned into conversations about securing a permanent New Orleans home for contemporary works.

Sidney Besthoff's donation of a K&B Drugs building turned those conversations into action, and the decades that followed saw the Central Business District space become a haven for visual and various types of performing art. A 1996 story in *The Times-Picayune* heralding the institution's 20th anniversary opined that the "CAC has nurtured a generation of New Orleans artists and been a catalyst of arts development."

Its more recent past has not always been steady. In 2012, Jay Weigel stepped down from the executive directorship after what online art magazine [Southern Glossary](#) later called "controversies and rumblings that the CAC had grown stagnant." [The Gambit](#) noted his resignation came after artists removed their work from one of the museum's exhibitions in protest over what was viewed then as the institution's misplaced priorities.

When Barclay stepped in, the arts community's excitement was clear. He'd visited New Orleans often and arrived at the CAC in 2013 with a solid resume: A degree in fine arts from Loyola Marymount University, a law degree from Loyola in Los Angeles, and various positions at arts institutions across the country, including as the founding president and CEO of the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh. Before his appointment at the CAC, Barclay completed development, operations and fundraising plans for the Vision Theater in Los Angeles.

"Everybody was so excited (Barclay) was our first African-American (executive director)," CAC Board of Trustees co-chair Gregg Porter said in the interview Tuesday (March 19). "It was just so bizarre we would have these accusations (of discrimination) that it really defies logic."

Upon arriving in New Orleans, Barclay looked at the old K&B building as an asset. The upper two floors of the facility had never been brought into use by the CAC. Barclay forged a partnership with The Domain Companies that allowed redevelopment of those areas and others in the building. The goal: to elevate the artistic exhibition spaces while also carving out a new income for the arts organization through rental fees.

It worked. The Shop at the CAC has emerged as one of downtown's signature co-working spaces, and the CAC's profile has risen as it played host to a variety of big-name events, such as The New York Times' Cities for Tomorrow conference and Serena Williams' celebrity-filled wedding to Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian.

Meanwhile, Barclay's national connections were paying other dividends for the CAC as it collected on grants from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and, recently a multi-year grant from the Wallace Foundation aimed at attracting "the growing, local community of young African Americans, a group historically underrepresented in the CAC's performance programs." Barclay's role in securing the grant was "instrumental," according to a source with knowledge of those conversations.

The organization's 2017 tax filing notes contributions and grants to the CAC had climbed to nearly \$2 million.

## **Flooded offices 'created instability'**

Although New Orleans is a city with a deeply creative reputation, it's not one with tons of cashflow. Historically, big money donations here come from wealthy families, not from Fortune 500 companies; Louisiana has just two in the entire state. Personal relationships are key, as are ties to national foundations.

The exhibitions themselves were part of the CAC's success at securing those grants. Under Barclay's leadership, the CAC's art was growing more inclusive, more diverse. One exhibition in particular, "30 Americans: A Retrospective of African-American Art," was described by NOLA.com art critic Doug MacCash as "a knockout punch."

CAC Board Vice-Chair David Baker said Barclay's approach prompted other local museums to "emulate what was happening here."

"I've seen how that has set the course for some of the larger institutions," Baker said of "30 Americans."

But it was also during Barclay's time at the CAC that the organization faced a major setback: A construction mishap resulted in the flooding of its offices. Equipment was ruined. Years' worth of data was lost. Offices and meeting rooms were unusable. For months, employees had to work from a coffee shop on the first floor, or from home.

The flood, Wegmann said, "was hugely disruptive."

CAC Board of Trustees co-chair Bryan Bailey said the December 2016 event "created instability within the organization." The following summer, Bailey recalled, he heard Barclay at a dinner party suggest the CAC could benefit from HR support, though Bailey said the flooded offices were not the express reason for that suggestion.

The CAC contracted Gotcha Covered, a New Orleans HR firm, on Aug. 1, 2018, according to the official summary of the report sent to various former staffers and board members.

Neither Wegmann, a former employee and board member who returned to work at the CAC on Nov. 1, 2018, nor board members Bailey, Porter and Baker knew what Gotcha Covered's initial marching orders were. They also weren't part of any discussions with Gotcha Covered before or after it was contracted by the CAC. Bailey and Porter said they have not even read the entire report.

Gotcha Covered co-founder Stefanie J. Allweiss, whose name is on the report, did not respond to a voicemail nor an emailed request for comment.

## **CAC turnover is 'a fact of life'**

The report's stated purpose was "to determine the root cause(s) of turnover" and to provide recommendations to the CAC Board's Executive Committee for stemming it. The extent of the

staff churn problem is evident in a comparison of the CAC staff listing posted online in January 2018 and the one there today. Of the 22 names listed last January, just six remain.

According to the report and former staff members, Gotcha Covered's representatives went about their mission quickly, interviewing then-current and former staffers to discuss what prompted so many people to leave the CAC's employ.

The resulting report, which was compiled after review of "emails, performance evaluations, incident reports and action plans, brochures, memos, exit interviews, the CAC Employee Handbook and letters of engagement" in addition to those interviews, paints a grim picture: As a workplace, the CAC was "toxic," "hostile" and "uncomfortable," the report notes.

"Several former employees still have 'waves of panic' when they think back on their work at the CAC," the report says. "For the few employees who remain, many are stressed out and afraid for their job security; one claims to have PTSD."

Also outlined is how this atmosphere was linked to an "orchestrated, behind the scenes" and racially motivated effort to involve some specific donors to force Barclay to leave the organization.

The report quotes one employee as stating: "This pattern of behaviors creates a great risk for the organization, which needs to be mitigated with care and haste, before the CAC ends up in a court of public opinion being accused of conducting and reinforcing racist and bullying practices." Another employee in a position of influence is singled out for treating white employees more respectfully than black employees, and creating racial tension by openly criticizing the CAC's programs as "too Afro-centric."

When I asked Wegmann how she responded to the allegations about Barclay's exit, she threw her hands up.

"He resigned," she said.

Asked why he resigned, Wegmann repeated, "he resigned," before again declining to discuss the report and speculating "maybe he felt he'd accomplished what he set out to do."

The report itself notes that, in spring 2018, Barclay had been asked "to develop a performance improvement 'Action Plan' in an effort to address some of his leadership issues," and "much progress (had) been made at the time of his resignation."

Since the August announcement of Barclay's resignation, a review of the Board of Trustees roster shows at least 10 people have stepped down, which Wegmann also characterized as typical given the leadership change. A source with knowledge of board personnel, however, confirmed many trustees submitted their own resignations in protest.

As for the characterization of the CAC as a toxic work environment, Wegmann said she couldn't speak to the time before her Nov. 1 return, but she has "not observed any of that kind of behavior since I've been here."

Wegmann called the staff turnover "a fact of life" and emphasized the CAC's skill at training young talent who are often able to move on to better positions and higher salaries elsewhere. Bailey, the board co-chair, said the organization under Barclay's leadership was structured that way.

"There was always sort of a ceiling for employees to come in here," Bailey said. "At some point, they're going to want to get out."

## Ex-employees describe 'cutthroat' workplace

Nanette Saucier did not want to get out.

"I would have stayed at the CAC forever if it had continued on the trajectory we were growing and diversifying," she said. "It was ripped out from under us."

Saucier is the only one of five former employees who spoke to NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune about their time at the CAC who agreed to be identified by name. The others spoke on condition of anonymity citing fears of retribution in a small industry.

Saucier, who started at the CAC in 2007 and who, by the time she left in September of 2018, was Barclay's deputy director and chief financial officer, believes what she read in the report sent to her at Christmas.

That the organization was working on increasing the diversity of its offerings was of particular import, sources said, as the CAC fought back against a reputation where it was derided, in some circles, as the "Caucasian Arts Center."

"The CAC has always been great, but we were turning the corner to being next level while diversifying staff, audience and our board," she said. "But for all of it to be shut down and ... for someone to go after the director like these people went after him to get rid of him, it's just really upsetting."

All four other former staffers who asked to remain anonymous stand by the general characterization of the workplace, although three take some issue with the veracity of their specific quotes.

"It was very uncomfortable," said one staffer of working at the CAC. "The tension was very thick. ... An environment in which you felt like you had eyes on you at all times and not knowing why or what was the reason behind it."

"There's only like 20 people on staff, and the departments should have been working together," said another. "But for some reason I still don't understand, there was just sort of a cutthroat, competitive work environment."

The perception of a hostile work environment was reinforced by the fact that the report presented to the board, and eventually sent around anonymously by email, directly quoted complaining staffers by name.

"We thought it was supposed to basically be an (anonymous) investigation," Saucier said. "We were candid and honest because we thought it was safe to do so. Reading it was not so was (shocking). ... I knew everything, had seen those things. But putting it all in one document and realizing other people were seeing it, it was sickening."

## Damage control efforts didn't work

Wegmann and other board members said once they knew unauthorized copies of the report were being circulated, an email was immediately sent out asking staffers and board members to delete the file.

"By the time I knew I'd received it," said Porter, the board co-chair, "I'd already gotten the call to delete it, so I did."

Not everyone was so diligent.

"Frankly, on an almost weekly basis, I run into someone out there in the world who has received a copy of it," Wegmann said.

Still, she does not have much to say as to what's happened as a result of it, beyond the admission that one person had been terminated.

Baker characterized the board's reaction to the report this way: "We will recognize that things like this do happen in every organization, whether there's a report produced about it or not."

Baker continued, "We will make every stride that we can to ensure that the environment here is one that is positive, forward-moving and a great place to work, visit, support, send other people to." Future board members will be asked to take additional "diversity and sensitivity training" as well as training to understand what, as board members, "they should be doing, what they should know and how they should act in public," he said.

While Wegmann acknowledged "this transition has been challenging," the CAC's top brass does not expect Barclay's resignation to result in difficulty securing a new executive director. The organization enlisted the help of Management Consultants for the Arts to recruit that position, and the job was posted in mid-February.

They expect to announce a new executive director by April 30.

"It's an exciting time," Porter said. "It's a great time for the new director to come."

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