

July 16, 2021

Doug Schantz
Owner
Nellie's Sports Bar
900 U St. NW
Washington, DC 20001

On Tuesday, July 14, Collective Action for Safe Spaces—a Black trans, queer, and non-binary-led organization that uses public education, cultural organizing, coalition-building, and advocacy to build community safety—received your workshop request in response to the violence enacted toward Keisha Young, a 22-year-old Black college student on June 13 at your establishment. At this time, and as explained in detail below, CASS will not and cannot engage in training Nellie's.

While CASS appreciates the request to have us equip Nellie's restaurant and venue staff with the tools to intervene in instances of assault and harassment, it does not escape us that DC organizers (led by Harriet's Wildest Dreams et al.) have collectively created five specific demands on steps toward accountability. Each of these demands (arguably with the exception of #3) have not been met by you or management nor have you engaged any of the organizations about genuine accountability and next steps.

As a reminder, the demands created approximately one month ago are the following:

1. Nellie's, through its owner, must issue a full public apology to Keisha Young. (unmet)
2. Nellie's owner and management team must agree to attend a public community listening session. (unmet)
3. Nellie's must continue to pay Nellie's staff during the community boycott.
4. Nellie's must release the video footage of the full interaction between security and Keisha Young. (unmet)
5. Nellie's must give reparations to the DC's Black queer and trans community and remain shut down until the above mentioned demands are met. (unmet)

Unfortunately, Nellie's has refused to even engage in a discussion regarding these demands which underscores to us that the bar/restaurant training is not being requested in good faith but instead for damage control and to continue making money under the guise of wanting to be better and seem more inclusive. This directly contravenes CASS' mission, vision, and values and will not contribute to the safety of staff or patrons.

Lest we forget: more than one month ago, a young Black woman was dragged down the stairs by her hair and arm by a security guard (albeit an independent contractor), who worked under Nellie's purview and guidance. We are deeply concerned that a training would mean nothing if you are still refusing to issue an apology for the harm and violence your establishment inflicted, let alone the remainder of the demands.

Furthermore, your request only noted that the training is being asked for “in response to an incident [on June 13, 2021]” as though Nellie’s has not been called out/in for anti-Black racism numerous times including for disparate treatment of responses to Black patrons, increase in particular drinks stereotyped as ordinarily purchased by Black patrons, intentional change in music on days predominated by Black patrons, and the hanging of the #BlueLivesMatter flag in 2018. These are just a few examples that have been presented to CASS and other Black-led organizations in DC.

As Nellie’s very well knows, CASS’ Board members and previous Executive Director interfaced back in 2017 after attempting to hold Nellie’s accountable for not being equipped to handle conflict in its establishment; and though we have moved on from some of that, it is clear to us that not much in the establishment has changed. That is a choice. It is futile, and quite frankly impossible, to provide training to a bar that refuses to be accountable to the community it serves. Nellie’s must accept the reality that many Black queer patrons have attempted to speak about for years and met with much resistance: many of us do not feel safe in your establishment.

We acknowledge Nellie’s voluntarily closing from June 14, 2021 to July 11, 2021 and recognize that if it cannot even meet specific demands (including a simple apology for dragging a patron down the stairs), then what, if anything, has it learned in the past four weeks?

We are also forced to question what Nellie’s believes this particular bar training will do. At CASS, we have long understood and continue to recognize that trainings *alone* cannot suffice to shift the culture of any bar or restaurant. There must be ongoing renewals and recertifications; a core demonstrable belief by Nellie’s leadership (owner and managers) to establish culture, value, and behavior expectations of employees and contractors; and a specific commitment by all staff in safety for all, especially DC’s most marginalized communities (e.g. Black people, poor people, trans and non-binary people, sex workers). This is especially true as gentrification has intensified racial dynamics, increased anti-Black racism, and contributed to the pushout of Black residents away from spaces that were traditionally meant for them. Despite Nellie’s not causing that problem, it must acknowledge how much it benefits from it.

At CASS, we have made a deliberate choice to no longer offer safe bar trainings at the scale we once used to. This is because we know the culture of the bar and restaurant industry in a gentrifying DC cannot be remedied by a two and a half hour training—this is an evasion of real accountability. This is made abundantly clearer to us by the motives of your request to us.

As an organization that cultivates the greater DC community’s capacity to respond directly to patriarchal and state violence through transformative justice and abolitionist frameworks, we do not believe in punitive responses. Nonetheless, we do believe in public accountability and safe spaces for all. Because Nellie’s has refused to meet these demands, and has not even engaged organizers to have a private and/or public conversation, we are not confident it cares about its patrons’ safety but about its bottom line.

We invite you to think critically about what we are asking of you—to intentionally attempt to shift the culture of Nellie's and show us that you care about more than profit.

Sincerely,

CASS Board of Directors Co-Chairs, Noor Mir and Preston Mitchum
CASS Executive Director Je'Kendria Trahan
Support from Harriet's Wildest Dreams