



Gay couple banned from Walmart over dispute at Indiana store

By ChicagoPride.com News Staff

Dispute over BIC lighters and allegations of homophobia get gay couple banned from Walmart for life

South Bend, IN - A gay couple, both former Chicago attorneys, said they have been banned from Walmart for life after a dispute over BIC lighters and allegations of homophobia from the chain's employees.

The South Bend Tribune reports that on Aug. 16, Joe Paolucci and Thomas Hitchcock were stopped by store employees at the Niles, Mich., Walmart who suspected they had stolen lighters after the couple used a self-checkout.

The pair, along with their 11-year-old twin sons, were then detained by Walmart store employees.

"They asked if I had BIC lighters. I said, 'Yes,' and handed them over," Paolucci told the paper. "Then they asked if I had a receipt. I said, 'Yes, you're holding it.' Then this group of Wal-Mart employees started forming around us."

Both Paolucci and Hitchcock allege the employees were threatening and that one used a vulgarity which frightened the boys.

When asked to enter a "detention room" for questioning, the couple said they refused out of concern for their personal safety and asked the store personnel to call police.

Deputies from the Berrien County Sheriff's Department's Niles Township Patrol arrived and immediately handcuffed Paolucci without any investigation. Both Paolucci and Hitchcock, who was not handcuffed, were placed in separate squad cars.

The twins were turned over to store security personnel and locked in a security room where the couple alleges the boys endured disparaging remarks about their lifestyle from Walmart employees.

Nearly 45 minutes later, after officers reviewed security tapes and had determined the lighters weren't shoplifted, the couple was released.

After the incident was resolved the couple expected an apology from store personnel, instead employees read a statement that Paolucci and Hitchcock were banned from Walmart – the entire chain – for life.

Paolucci and Hitchcock said they likely won't file a lawsuit against Walmart.

Paolucci was general counsel for the real estate investment company owned by Chicago billionaire Sam Zell.