



# Oprah does damage control

## S. AFRICAN SCHOOL | Oprah hires local detective to check abuse claims

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A former Cook County sheriff's detective who "devoted every ounce of energy" to tracking down criminals who harmed or abused children has been called out of retirement by Oprah Winfrey.

The talk show queen has tapped Robert H. Farley to join a team investigating allegations that a staff member mistreated disadvantaged girls at Winfrey's school in South Africa.

A dormitory matron at Oprah Winfrey's school for disadvantaged girls in South Africa has been suspended amid allegations of serious misconduct.  
(AP file)

Farley and the other investigators are probing claims that a dorm matron may have physically and sexually abused pre-teen students at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls.

Winfrey earlier this year opened the \$46 million boarding school, which enrolls about 150 girls from poor families. The allegations have rocked the school, which is funded almost entirely by Winfrey.

School officials and Winfrey have said little publicly about the allegations, though in a statement released earlier, CEO John Samuel said an internal inquiry had been launched "based on one serious claim of misconduct involving a dormitory parent."

The accused was no longer on campus, Samuel said in his statement. The school's principal, meanwhile, has been placed on paid leave, according to South African news reports.

For her part, Winfrey -- who has visited the school twice since the allegations surfaced earlier this month -- said any claims of misconduct would be treated seriously.

"Nothing is more serious or devastating to me than an allegation of misconduct by an adult against any girl at the academy," Winfrey said in a statement.

Farley, who has consulted for a variety of law enforcement and child welfare agencies since his 2003 retirement from the sheriff's department, couldn't be reached for comment Monday.

But former colleagues say his passion is protecting children.

"He was incredibly dedicated and it was a dedication to a special issue: crimes against children. He devoted every ounce of energy to it," said Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who worked in the 1980s as a prosecutor with Farley.

Farley in 1997 started the sheriff's department child exploitation unit -- the first of its kind in the country -- then commanded it until his retirement. Detectives assigned to the unit used the Internet to fight online solicitation and molestation of children, a tactic copied by police nationwide.

Working with Farley was easy, Dart said, because he typically put together such a thorough case that defendants seldom went to trial.

"Bob's cases were so solid, they mostly pled guilty," Dart said.

His expertise is apparently what prompted Winfrey to add the veteran cop to the team of American and South African investigators.

Winfrey has been so shaken by the allegations that she tearfully apologized to the parents of students at the school during a recent visit there, according to South African news reports.

"Once she was made aware of the problems [approximately three weeks ago], her first call was for the plane to get her down there," said a close Oprah pal. "She will delegate certain things [on her show], but when it comes to something like this -- one of the causes closest to her heart -- she totally grabs the bull by the horns and deals with it."

**Contributing:** AP, news24 in South Africa