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Good News

Fairview Heights (IL) Director Settles Gender Discrimination Lawsuit Against City Council

By Deborah Owen

On January 3, 2006, the City Council of Fairview Heights voted to settle a gender discrimination lawsuit that I had filed in December 2003. It was a long journey that actually began when I was first hired.

I started with the city in 1979 as a Grade 6 (non-management). In 1986, the City Treasurer raised concern that there may be a potential problem in the way the city "treated" its female employees. Specifically, there were no females in any management classifications. A Management Level 5 (the lowest) was then created and two female employees were placed in that level. A few months later I was also "upgraded" thanks to the Library Board of Trustees protesting.

In 1994, the Library Board requested that my position be upgraded to a Management Level 3, citing similarities in responsibilities between myself and other higher ranked management positions. In 1995 after much dissention at the city council meetings, the Library Board agreed to accept a lesser upgrade to Management Level 4. However, during this timeframe the Director of Administrative Services (male) was promoted from a Management 5 to Management 3 and the Assistant City Engineer (male) was promoted from a Grade 8 to a Management 4, even though both of them had fewer years of experience or education than I did. In fact, of all the department heads, I was the only female and the lowest ranked. Yet I had the most education and some of the highest seniority. The Library Board would not attempt another upgrade request until 2003.

That last request made it through the city Finance and Personnel Committees. In November of 2003 the upgrade request was finally placed on the agenda for the city council's vote. It failed. Budgetary restraints were cited as reason for denial, however at the same meeting two part time inspectors (both male) were given increases. The night of the vote Council members were also given a "salary survey" of area library directors (put together by the city Clerk's office) that was misleading and erroneous. The city also did not conduct surveys of comparable salaries when deciding on promotions for male department heads. Subsequent attempts by the Library Board to reintroduce legislation and change votes failed.

Not knowing what to do next, I re-read ALA-APA's *Better Salaries and Pay Equity Toolkit* and hired an attorney. An attempt to settle was made by filing a Charge of Discrimination through the State of Illinois' Department of Human Rights and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. No agreement could be reached and I was issued a Notice of a Right to Sue. In December of 2004 I filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Fairview Heights and five of its aldermen claiming I was denied a promotion based on my gender.

The next 12 months were spent filing and counter filing in court, sitting in on depositions, being deposed myself, being turned down yet again for an upgrade in March of 2005 (prompting another charge of Discrimination against an alderman) and finally settling out of court in December 2005 for what I and the Library Board had originally asked for two years prior (plus \$20,000 in damages). The City of Fairview Heights admitted no wrongdoing.

The obvious question at the end of the day is: was this all worth it? I would have to answer yes. Just because library work is viewed as "girl's work" does not make it of lesser value. Like the teaching profession, we need to demonstrate our worth. Sometimes that means taking officials who make compensation decisions to task. I was encouraged tremendously by the stories I read in the *Better Salaries and Pay Equity Toolkit* as well as in the *Library Worklife* newsletter. They gave me the courage to follow through on my convictions and I hope others will do the same.

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