

New York Teacher

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**Poisoned by school mold,
librarian fights for her career**

The path back to work

Angela Page wants to reinvent her life's work as a librarian.

Page can create customized Web sites for each teacher to direct individual research. If students are studying World War II, Page can march ahead and filter through thousands of bits of information, presenting reliable sites for students to begin their study.

"I can do that for the whole school. I can also do video-conferencing. Why can't I be in my kitchen?" Page asked. "Much of my work was online research assistance, providing home use of databases and making customized Web sites."

The virtual librarian job she wants to create, she said, is a national trend in the field.

"I can podcast, or blog my lessons to them. I'm a very tech-savvy person," she said. "Teachers don't have this kind of time, and sources for research go way beyond books these days."

Although her illness grounds her at home for most activities, Page is a person who sees quite clearly beyond the confines of her illness. She has the passion for her work. She sees how technology is behind the stacks of any modern library keeping pace.

Resources available

NYSUT recommends locals maintain active health and safety committees.

If a local encounters a problem it feels is beyond its expertise, local leaders can call NYSUT Health and Safety Specialist Wendy Hord, (800) 342-9810.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity renders Angela Page a virtual recluse

One day at the Liberty Middle School library where Angela Page had worked since it opened in 1991, the librarian went to retrieve a book from the shelf. She felt how slimy it was as it slipped through her hands, and then she herself slipped to the floor.

Page blacked out. When she came to, she crawled out of the library and into the hall, where she lay at the bottom of the steps until a teacher found her.

Lying there, Page realized why she was always getting sick in the library. The book was covered with mold from water leaking through the ceiling and seeping between and into the particle-board shelving.

The exposure to mold had knocked her out. Most libraries are known for bright posters, student

art projects and the latest books; this one has been decked out with buckets and tarps since it opened.

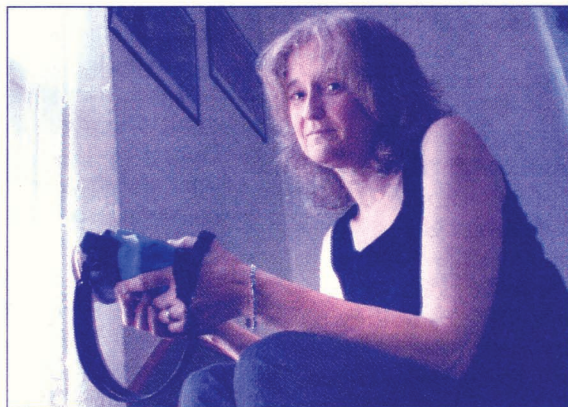
Page became so ill with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity she has barely been able to leave her house — much less return to work in the Sullivan County school where she had been employed. In November 2004, the state Workers' Compensation Board ruled she had a work-related injury and hypersensitivity reaction due to "occupational presence of fungi."

The diagnosis was later expanded to MCS. The district appealed. In March, she won a case before a three-member panel of the appellate board for Workers' Compensation, which agreed with three doctors specializing in mold exposure that Page has MCS, caused by the library conditions.

They cited "credible, medical evidence to support the finding of causally related MCS."

She received last year's pay. This came after living on no income during the long resolution of the workers' comp case. Page was paying \$1,100 a month for health insurance for herself and her children.

Page's quest is more far-reaching than a compen-



Angela Page with her gas mask.



Colleagues support Angela Page, including Liberty TA President Tim Hamblin, center, in white shirt.

sation case — she wants her career back (see article at left).

The district tried to force her to retire by filing retirement papers without telling her, according to Page and Liberty Faculty Association President Tim Hamblin. Page retracted the filing and refused to retire, choosing to make a stand for working with a disability.

The school district then raised the stakes, seeking to revoke her tenure and dismiss her for failing to come to work in the very place where she became ill.

Like a teacher, a librarian can lose tenure — and her job — under Section 3020-a of State Education Law if the district can prove incompetence or misconduct.

Hearings on her case continue in July.

“I’m fighting to be accommodated, just like anyone with a disability,” Page said.

Solidarity

“Students, teachers and staff are jeopardized when chronic safety problems are ignored,” said NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi. “Nobody’s place of work should make them sick.”

Members of her union, the Liberty FA, have defended Page throughout the proceedings. They have demonstrated at school board meetings with signs declaring “Accommodate, Don’t Terminate.”

Local President Hamblin said Page’s case is precedent-setting.

“There have been some other medical issues with some staff members,” he said. Two teachers with health issues were moved to the elementary school, Hamblin said. They had been working in science labs, located above the library.

Hamblin, who worked in the middle school until last year, said the library and other places had extensive leaks.

“Different parts of the hall would leak in the corridor connecting middle school and high school,” he said. “They always had buckets in that corridor.” The school was built in a wet area.

In monthly meetings with administrators, repre-

sentatives of the 170-member faculty association pressed concerns about the leaks.

To date, the carpet has been taken up and damaged ceiling tiles have been replaced, Hamblin said. Damaged books have been removed and work continues on the roof. Voters approved a referendum authorizing more work this summer.

“We thought they would totally gut it,” Hamblin said. “They didn’t.”

The corrective actions have taken years.

“I remember when we had open house in 1991, there were leaks,” Hamblin said.

Buckets were placed under the leaks. When the leaking worsened, Page would go in to the school on weekends and empty the buckets.

Students would trip over the “omnipresent” buckets, Page said, and the rug was always wet. The district had the Sullivan County BOCES safety coordinator come in, and different molds were found.

The union paid for a mold and radon inspection, which determined the library was not a safe space, Page said.

When the district had the rug torn up over spring break in 2004, there was no machine to create a negative air flow and no containment. Mold spores swept through the air.

Huge shelving units in the library housed moldy books. Page said when the shelves buckled from leaking water, they were bolted back into place, rather than being replaced.

She began getting mildly sick in 2002. Then she started fainting. “I’d get dizzy and start stumbling around,” she said.

Her doctor thought perhaps she needed more exercise, so she joined a gym and worked out every morning. By January 2004, she was so tired every day she felt disoriented.

“We had a lot of snow and a lot of melting and leaking,” she said. One day that month she came to work and the library ceiling was on the floor, she said.

By February, the library reeked. One morning, within an hour of arriving, she fainted. Her body stiffened. She went to the doctor, reporting, “It feels like I’ve been poisoned.”

She was thought first to have the flu, and then a sinus infection.

Like any astute librarian, Page went by the book. She mailed some of the library’s holdings to the Center for Indoor Research at Texas Technical University, which she said reported nearly 1 million mold-colony-forming units per square inch on some of the books.

“What was alarming beyond the amount was the varieties of molds, showing the problem has been growing,” she said.

Unable to work at the school any longer, she left in June 2004.

The union and the district sought help from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health for problems at the middle school and some air quality problems at the elementary school.





Angela Page at home

MICHAEL WEISBROT PHOTOS

Hamblin said 20 middle school teachers filed paperwork with health complaints.

In December 2005, NIOSH declared health hazards at the Liberty schools, noting persistent leaks, mold on murals and rotted wood. (See www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/2005-0033-2984.pdf.)

When the local newspaper reported the NIOSH finding, more than 100 concerned parents and teachers flocked to the school board meeting, but only three public statements were taken before the meeting was closed, Page said. At that same meeting, the board voted surreptitiously to submit Page's application for retirement, she said.

Page has regularly gone to the occupational health clinic at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, part of the State University of New York, to help with diagnosis and learn how to avoid exposure. "They are extremely helpful and very knowledgeable," she said.

"Given the issues surrounding this facility, this is one more example of why it is critical to maintain Upstate Medical University," said Iannuzzi.

Compromised

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity — MCS — has compromised Page's life. Her daughter Miranda spent her sophomore year living with friends and her father a half hour away, because Page was too ill to care for her.

When Miranda comes into the house from school, she's covered with scents the average person wouldn't notice: lingering perfume and deodorant that friends might have worn, paper products she's touched, shampoo or laundry soap clinging to clothes from a friendly hug someone gave her.

She has to go through a plastic barricade, bag her clothes and use special shower products to remove hidden scents before she can say hello to her mom.

Otherwise, the scents are unbearable for Page. Any airborne propellant like perfume "goes right to our brain. We (MCS sufferers) have no more blood brain barrier. It's like suffocating," said Page.

Page's longtime partner, John, and his son moved across the street — the daily routine was too much stress.

John, formerly a network administrator for the Liberty district, was bringing home fragrances and mold spores from the middle school, which Page could not tolerate.

He took a job with a different school district a long commute away.

Mold triggered her condition. Eventually, Page said, she was unable to process any petroleum byproduct, such as laundry detergent, or chemical fragrances added to personal products such as lotions, shampoos, air fresheners or dryer sheets, whose softness comes from a chemical coating.

"When I first got sick I slept all the time and couldn't function. I couldn't leave the room without burning lungs," said Page.

Eventually, hungry to go outside, she found an opening in the imprisonment of her illness.

"After spending about four months isolated in one room for good breathing — with the metal bed frame and non-toxic mattress only — I began walking to the nearby graveyard where the wind is always fresh and clean," Page said.

She would go before dawn, before buses and cars hit the road, walking a loop around the headstones. She wears a bulky mask.

Graveyard walks

"I would often cry there, and it wouldn't matter if someone sees you crying in a graveyard," Page said.

Former teacher friends and former students are buried at this Liberty graveyard, which Page calls "a connection to life and death and community."

Page began seeing a therapist, who would meet her at the cemetery.

"We walked or sat in the good air, so I could not react to his personal products and because I could not tolerate his office," she said.

— Liza Frenette