

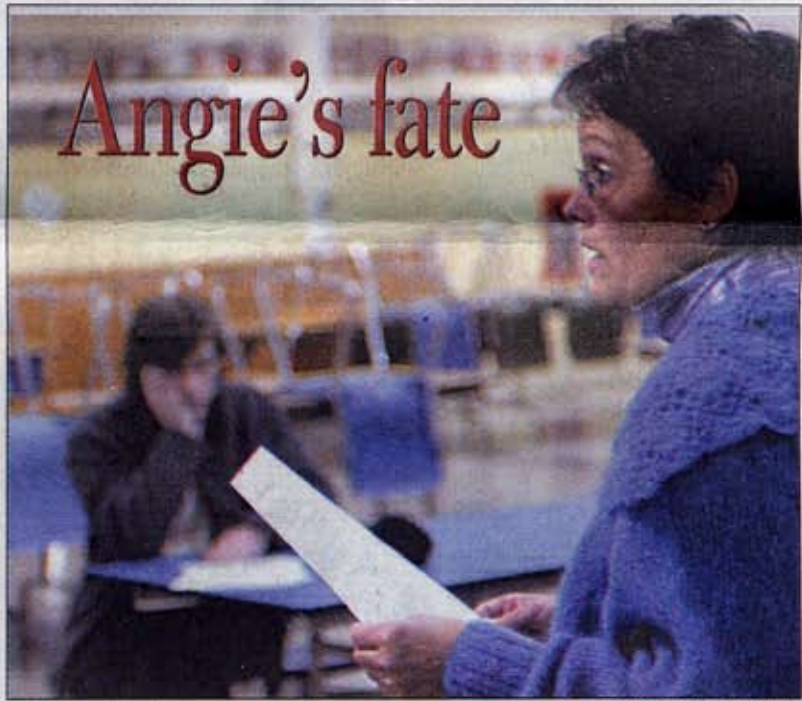
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TED WADDELL | DEMOCRAT

Padma Dyvine spoke out against the firing of Angela Page by the Liberty CS Board of Education at last Tuesday's board meeting.

## *Liberty School Board votes to fire librarian*

BY TED WADDELL

**LIBERTY**—The axe fell on Liberty Middle School librarian Angela "Angie" Page, a tenured employee who was forced to flee her job after exposure to mold.

The Liberty Board of Education, at the Tuesday, December 11 meeting, voted 6-1 (with two abstentions) to fire her.

Board members voting to terminate were President David L. Burke, Michael McGuire, Joyce Burnett, Phil Olsen, Daniel Parkhurst, Cathie Smith; opposing the firing was Andy Kavleski; abstaining were John Milano and Joyce Teed.

Page was hired by the district in 1983 as an elementary school librarian, and after the leak-prone middle school was constructed in 1991, moved up a few grades to the new middle school library, and began reporting ceiling leaks to the current administration.

In 2003, Page started to smell "mold created as a consequence on mildewed library books," according to NYS Education Department File No. 6,431, a report /finding of disciplinary charges brought by the district against Page, prepared by Dennis J. Campagna, a mediator representing the NYS ED Office of Employer-Employee Relations.

According to Page, a tenured employee with 23 years service at the district, she has not been able to work at the school since June 2004 as her sensitivity to moldy books evolved into a case of multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS), further compounding medical issues.

Page eventually won a worker's compensation claim, but it was appealed in June 2006 and her regular pay and benefits were suspended.

After her accumulated sick days ran out in March 2007, things started to get tough for the sick librarian and mother of three, as her reported \$81,701 salary evaporated and the district ramped up efforts to fire her for alleged "incompetence".

The district charged that Page "has been absent from work on each and every one of the scheduled work days of the 2004-2005 school year, the 2005-2006 school year, and the 2006-2007 school year... her absences have had a detrimental impact on students and the school district."

But the former middle school librarian said working with the school's moldy books made her sick and unable to work.

"Sometime in late 2003, the

PLEASE SEE **ANGELA**, 4A



# ANGELA: Liberty MS librarian fired

FROM FRONT PAGE

respondent (Page) began to smell mold created as a consequence on mildewed library books," continued Campagna. "Subsequent to respondent's initial exposure to mold toxins, she began experiencing breathing difficulties... symptoms worsened during the winter and spring 2004 as she continued working in the middle school library. On February 3, 2004, respondent entered the library, testified to smelling a horrible odor and fainted within one hour. The respondent 'crawled' out of the library and sought medical attention..."

After Page re-shelved approximately 14,000 books, the district temporarily closed the library to repair roof leaks, replaced water damaged ceiling tiles and ripped out carpeting, replacing it with floor tiles, but the library continued to leak, forcing a second short-term closure.

In the wake of air sample testing, Dr. Ritchie Shoemaker, Page's treating physician said, "Based on my evaluation... and my review of her medical history and environmental reports, it is my opinion to a reasonable degree of medical certainty that she has become disabled for all occupations following occupational exposure to resident toxigenic organisms including fungi, growing in water damaged areas of her workplace."

While then superintendent of schools Lawrence Clarke offered Page a job in the high school, she nixed the idea, saying she wanted a job off-site, including the possibility of telecommuting from home as a grant writer.

In a response dated September 8, 2006 interim superintendent Ed Rhine wrote to Page, "I do not doubt that you continue to have professional skills which may be of value to the district... [but] we have no need to create any other full-time position, such as a 'grant writer,' which might enable you to work at home full-time."

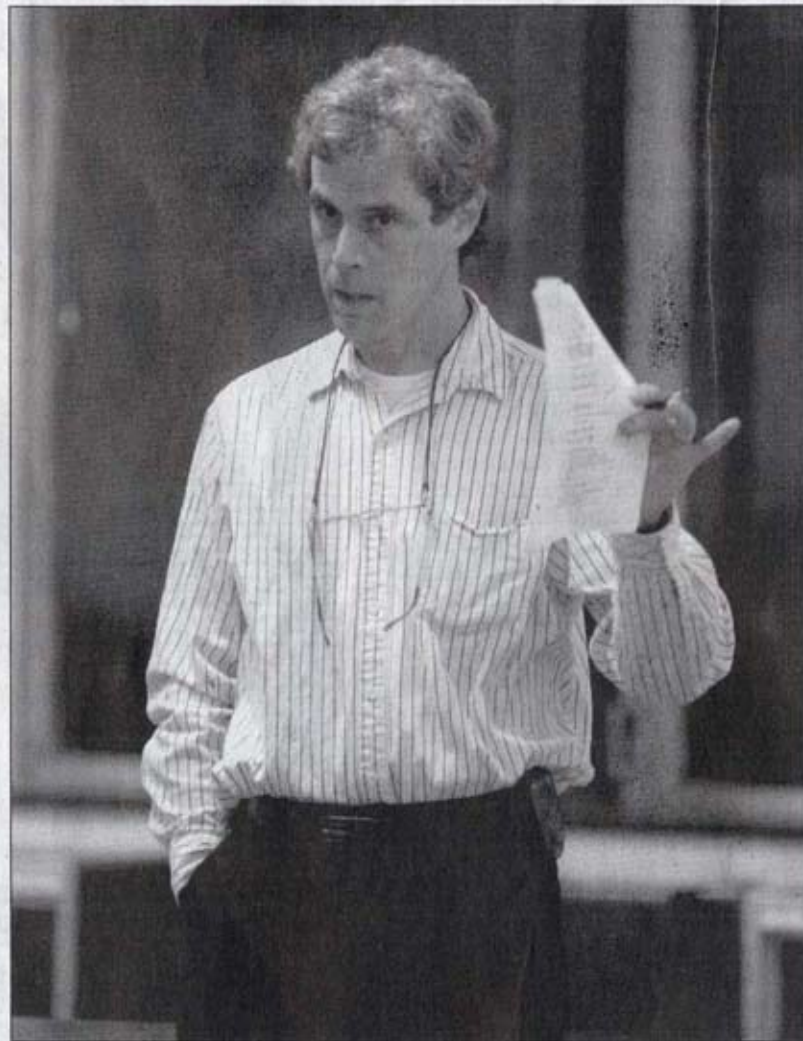
As both parties drew lines in the sand, the district maintained its stand that Page should go because she hasn't shown up for work in three years, while the 51-year old former librarian says she's disabled because of working conditions (mold) at the school and the district owes her a job.

During the board meeting last Tuesday, several folks addressed the board with impassioned pleas for mercy.

"A few weeks ago the district won the right to legally fire Ms. Page due to incompetence, because she did not come to work in an environment that made her sick," said Padma Dyvine, who signed her open letter to the board of education "taxpayer, parent, friend, concerned citizen, nurse."

"The final straw, firing Angela Page, can absolve the district from having to pay her health insurance at a time when she needs it to counter her illness... I am appalled at the callousness, short-sightedness and deceit of our elected officials. I cannot believe that I am living in a place where an employee is punished for getting sick in a location that is unsafe.

"If this board fires Ms. Page, it will reflect a decision by people with small hearts, no moral scruples,



TED WADDELL | DEMOCRAT

John Webber, a friend of Angela Page, had harsh words for the board and previous administrators.

blindness about the social ramifications to the children of our community, and who are driven by fear," added Dyvine.

Charlie Barbuti, a local businessman, read a letter into the record from Malcolm Hardy, one of Page's three children, a 2003

graduate of Liberty High who is hard at work in St. Louis aiding communities struck by disaster.

"Do we, as a community, not hold the ability along with the hope, to try to accommodate a woman who has served most of her life in our structure?" wrote



Hardy. "Do we simply abandon the task because it's convenient? Will we next dispose of textbooks and desks, because they are a burden on our resources?"

"To believe that my mother is incompetent is a mistake. She simply cannot function in the reality you present her, but that is not her doing."

Speaking on behalf of the Liberty Faculty Association, 15-year president Timothy Hamblin called the working conditions in the middle school "deplorable" at the time Page was exposed to the mildewed books.

"The corrected actions you have recently taken to fix the water infiltration problems cannot erase the negligence that took place prior," he said.

"As members of the educational board you should have demanded that the administration make the necessary accommodations so Angie could continue to serve the school community. As Demosthenes once stated, 'You cannot have a proud and chivalrous spirit if your conduct is mean and paltry; for whatever a man's actions are, such must be his spirit.'"

Then in short order, the board took a roll call vote, an action demanded by John Webber, a close friend of Page, who left the local district in 2006 after six years as network administrator.

"All we get around here are hit and run administrators," he said. "They don't understand her 23 years of service."

David L. Burke, president of the board of education, commented on the vote to fire Page.

"I don't have a reaction to it," he said.

Kavleski was the lone board member to vote against terminating the middle school librarian.

"My conscience made me feel I had to vote no," he said.

In summarizing his decision as hearing officer for the case, Campagna said, "The task... to impose the ultimate sanction of termination is not an easy one, particularly where, as here, the respondent [Angela Page] rendered excellent services to the district in her role as middle school librarian preceding her absences resulting from MCS."

"This is not a case where the employer is seeking the termination of an employee for incompetence due to a proven inability to perform the requirements of the job," added Campagna, "Rather, this case boils down to the reasonable expectation of this employer that its employees be present in order that they can perform their duties in an efficient and effective manner."

A day after the board voted to fire her, Page, a tenured employee, filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court alleging disability discrimination and violation of the district's contract with the teacher's union.

She is seeking \$2 million in damages, plus legal fees.

Sitting home alone breathing oxygen from a series of steel tanks, in house that has been turned into a virtual fortress against toxins in the outside world, Page reacted to the vote to fire her after 23 years of service to the local school community.

"I feel like I've been thrown in the garbage, I can't imagine there's no accountability," she said.

"I spent 13 years emptying buckets, and nobody cares," added Page. "They have taken my career and my health."