

New York Teacher

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JANUARY 31, 2008

Education: Hillary's priority

Sen. Hillary Clinton
at the union's 2007
convention.

**'Schools will be
at the top of the
national agenda'**

■ *See pages 16-17*

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A Union of Professionals

**VOTE
Feb. 5**

\$1 million mark
*NYSUT's Strides
effort sets
new standard*

Page 6

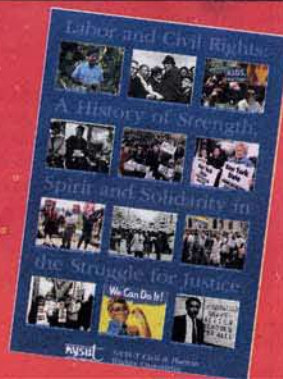


Justice denied
*Fired librarian files
federal lawsuit*

Page 5

**Celebrating
civil rights**
*A free poster
for you*

Page 8



School fails accountability test: fires ill librarian

Effects of mold linger for Liberty school district

Stung by a school board that fired her for not showing up to do her job — when the job is what made her a shut-in because of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity — librarian Angela Page has filed a \$2 million lawsuit in U.S. District Court against the Liberty school district.

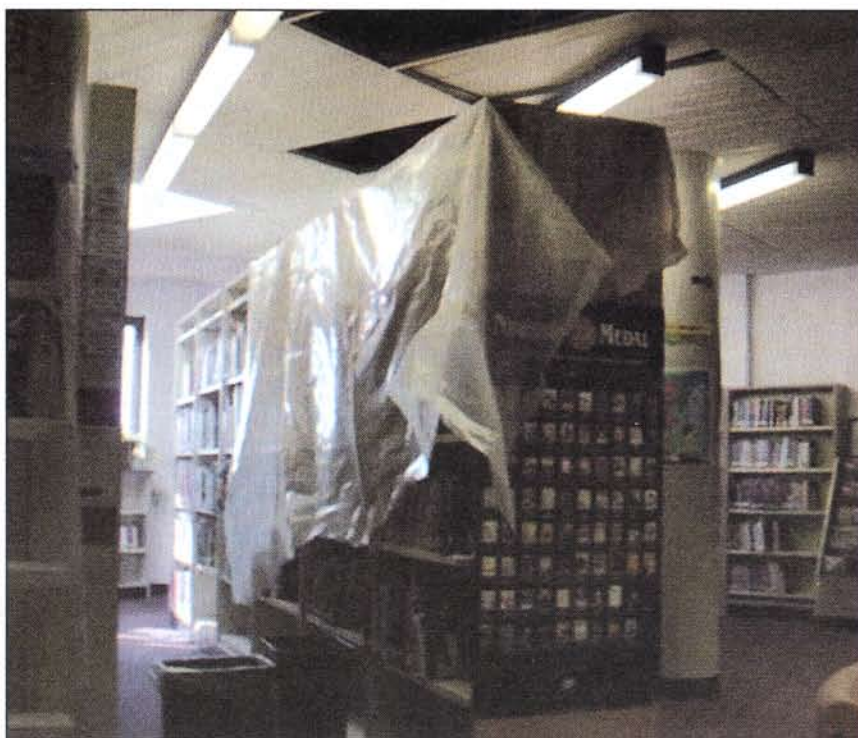
She is charging disability discrimination and violation of the teachers contract that is supposed to ensure employment while on workers comp.

The irony of the board's mid-December decision to fire her is that, despite losing her health, all Angela Page wanted was a job.

Her job.

She wanted it back. Page created a plan that would allow her to work as a media specialist from home or another safe space to deal with the debilitating MCS that developed after she spent years working in a mold-plagued library with a leaky roof.

This plan would have included tutoring by computer, grant-writing, video-conferencing, podcasting, lesson-plan writing, customized classroom Web pages and online book talks.



PROVIDED BY ANGELA PAGE

imously winning an appeal — that she was given money for the 2005-06 school year. Appeals have held up more of Page's wages from June 2006 to Dec. 11, 2007, when she was fired.

"The district's actions are unjust, immoral and indefensible," said NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi.

Ann Harrison, regional staff director for NYSUT's mid-Hudson office, said there is medical evi-

Page said. Furthermore, she said her doctors said being exposed to petrochemical byproducts and synthetic fragrances such as perfume, scented shampoos and scented laundry products would worsen her condition.

At the Liberty Middle School, 13 years of water leaks mixed with tars, brewing mold gases that disabled Page. Once, after picking up a book covered with mold, Page passed out.



MARIA R. BASTONE

Above: Angela Page and her gas mask. Left: The Liberty Middle School library in 2002, with an overhead tarp holding back water leaking from the ceiling.

The first six months she was confined to one room with just a metal bed and non-toxic mattress. Visitors had to go through a plastic barrier and shower with special products.

Her other daughter Miranda had to move out and stay with friends or with her dad, a half hour away. Page's longtime companion, John, took an apartment across the street with his son to lessen outside exposures.

"I was a resource person, not a babysitter," Page said. "I can still do the same services I did before as a virtual librarian."

But last month the school board in the Sullivan County district voted to fire her — a board that had for years failed to successfully address environmental health problems in the Liberty Middle School library where Page worked.

"That a school or a business can make someone ill and then fire someone for being ill is just outrageous," Page said. "There's no penalty. There's no accountability."

Page had been with the district 23 years. "Had my mother been any less dedicated, she might not have acquired the serious illness which now torments her and our family," Page's daughter Morgan wrote in a letter to the school board. Page used to go into school during weekend rainstorms and empty buckets placed under leaks.

Page left her job in June 2004, unable to work any longer as her illness worsened. She filed for workers compensation, but it was not until April 2007 — after unan-

dence that Page's problems are attributable to her work in the Liberty school building.

"The district had an obligation to work with Angela, not against her, in first addressing her medical issues and second in arranging an alternate work schedule and location," Harrison said.

Broken system

"Part of what's wrapped up in this story is the broken system of workers comp," said Page. "I lost my savings and, fortunately, have been supported by family members while I've been waiting for a decision. Appeals and delays allow the opposition to block, lessen or postpone compensation."

The school offered her other on-site librarian positions. But none were medically acceptable, she said. Her doctors stated she could not function in any space with a history of mold exposure.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health had given the Liberty school buildings a negative health assessment.

In fact, voters just passed a bond to build the other libraries,

She got sicker by the month, struggling against dizziness, weakness and flu-like symptoms. It was after the school attempted a renovation of the library that Page was unable to breathe or speak normally.

"It's very common for schools to be damp, leaky or moldy," said Susan Brinchman, founder and director of the national, not-for-profit Center for School Mold Help (www.schoolmoldhelp.org). "No homeowner would set up buckets for decades and routinely collect water."

Brinchman urged teachers to check for stains or leaks in classrooms.

"Members who are aware of dampness and mold dangers should be vigilant and notify their local unions' health and safety committees about issues," said NYSUT Vice President Kathleen Donahue.

Isolation

Page was nearly isolated in her home for several years after leaving her job.

"At first, I spent a lot of time sleeping," she said. "It's a very lonely illness."

When the mail came she'd go outside with her mask, put letters into sheet protectors to protect against smells, and sometimes hang mail on the line. She even taped her windows to avoid fumes from neighbors' dryer vents.

Exposure to most synthetic chemicals increases her illness's reach. Dangerous products are those with an added scent. This can include deodorant, air fresheners, perfume and dishwashing detergent, to name a few.

"Fragrance is an unregulated industry," Page noted. "Anything can be added under the term fragrance. Sometimes there are dozens of chemicals under that one term."

Avoiding chemical triggers and mold, plus treatment for chemical injury, have allowed her to begin to heal in the last year. She can go out in public for short periods, carrying her mask. She is tested for toxins and then takes antidotes.

Chemicals are expunged from her body in an infrared dry-heat sauna, an approach also used by many 9/11 responders sick from

Continued on page 8

School fails test

Continued from page 5

chemical exposure. She eats an organic diet, has filters in her home and car and takes daily doses of oxygen, delivered to her home.

Page has been paying \$1,200 a month for health insurance for herself and her children. She logs day-long treatment visits several times a month.

With her loss of income, she is forced to consider going without insurance for her children so that she can afford to keep her own.

Page's colleagues from the Liberty Faculty Association, the Liberty School Employees Association and the Liberty Teaching Assistants, Monitors and Aides have asked the board repeatedly in letters and placards: "Accommodate, Don't Terminate."

Union members have added warmth to the blanket of solidarity they are hoping will ease the chill of the school board's decision.

Solidarity

The Liberty Teachers Association gave Page's daughter Miranda, a Liberty High grad, a \$500 supplement toward books each semester until she graduates from college.

"This was unanimously approved by the membership," said Tim Hamblin, president of the Liberty TA. Colleagues also took up a collection in each school building before the winter holiday break to help Page out financially.

"People are angry over this and know it could happen to anyone," said Hamblin. Twenty middle-school teachers filed paperwork with health complaints when NIOSH in December 2005 gave a negative health assessment to Liberty school buildings.

The agency declared health hazards at the middle school and an elementary school, noting persistent leaks, mold on murals and rotted wood. (www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/2005-0033-2948.pdf)

Page will have to rely on winning her workers compensation case for income.

She said her attorney told her it would only pay her a maximum of \$400 a week — the rate when her case was originally filed. (Workers compensation was increased in July 2007 to a cap of \$500 a week and will increase \$50 per week over the next two years for new cases.)

But right now there is no money coming in: appeals to Page's workers comp claims are holding up any income. She is striving to hold onto her home.

She is encouraged about the formation of a new mold and health task force by Gov. Spitzer (www.health.state.ny.us/press/releases/2007/2007-11-7_toxic_mold_task_force.htm)

Page has created her own Web site as well (www.libertyschoolmold.com) to spread the message of mold awareness.

NYSUT's Donahue said local leaders who have health and safety concerns should contact their labor relations specialist to access NYSUT's health and safety specialist, Wendy Hord.

— Liza Frenette