

Former Almont Sgt. speaks out

by David Fredrick | Jun 5, 2024

Black shares “the real truth”; wins \$895,000 lawsuit

Editor’s Note: A story regarding the retirement of former Almont police Chief was published in the May 29th edition of the Tri-City Times. Former Almont Sgt. Laura Black, upon seeing the article, reached out to the newspaper and felt compelled to set the record straight with “the real truth. The Tri-City Times attempted to speak with Andy Martin regarding this story and according to Almont Sgt. Dave Repshas, “Andy said he has no comment.”

ALMONT — Having seen an article in the Tri-City Times regarding the retirement of Almont Police Chief Andrew Martin, a former Sgt. with the department contacted the Times and asked to be able to share what she says is “the real truth” about Martin’s “retirement”.

Laura Black served with the Almont PD for over 18 years, working her way up to Sgt. before being fired by Martin for what she called “sexual harassment” and intimidation.

Late last year, Black won a legal judgment against Martin and the Village of Almont, to the tune of nearly \$1 million, which she says eventually led to the Almont village council not extending Martin’s contract.

However, Interim Village Manager Dale Kerbyson said that was not the case.

“The Village’s cost in that lawsuit was nowhere near that (million) amount,” Kerbyson stated. “And, he (Martin) was not forced out. He chose retirement (after the lawsuit) and I do know there was a settlement made. I don’t know the amount or if that information is sealed. This all happened before I came here.”

Village President Steven Schneider, in an email to the Tri-City Times, said there was a separation agreement reached between Martin and the Village.

In a second email, he stated, “The Village paid \$175,000, at the insistence of the insurance carrier, as a condition of accepting the settlement offer on the table.

As to our upcoming insurance premium, it appears that there will be a 15% reduction over last year’s premium.”

Black, says she was paid \$895,000, adding, “I do know the Village paid a deductible and



Sgt. Laura Black

their insurance company paid the rest. I have the money in hand. It's invested."

A federal court judge encouraged attorneys for Martin and the Village to try to come to a settlement agreement prior to going to a jury trial and the two sides managed to get a deal done.

Sarah Thomas, one of two attorneys from Deborah Gordon Law of Bloomfield Hills, who worked on the case, spoke with the Tri-City Times and said there was a "summary judgment for the plaintiff."

The 18-month legal battle came to an end before heading to a jury trial. A federal judge said there was enough evidence to proceed to trial, despite objections from legal counsel for the Village and Martin.

Thomas said of the case, "Laura felt she was forced to work in a hostile environment. Officers there were verbally saying inappropriate things to her (after she became Sgt.) and said they weren't going to work for a female."

"We have sworn affidavits showing Andy Martin and the Village were in the wrong. We all gave sworn depositions and he (Martin) admitted he flat out lied."

According to Black, she was told by Martin "women don't belong in uniform, they belong in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant."

At the time the comments were being made, Black was working the day shift and was later moved to night shift by Martin, shortly after the incident. A move she saw as retaliation for her taking action against the Chief.

"After I was fired, he (Martin) black marked me with MCOLES which made it difficult to get a job with any other department in the state," Black stated.

She now serves with the City of St. Clair, in St. Clair County, after the Chief of that department went to bat for her, working with MCOLES officials to determine she, in fact, did not deserve to have the black mark with the agency.

"It was a long and hard legal fight that I was willing to do," Black said. "The federal judge himself said in open court that Andy had lied. It was so unprofessional, what he did to me. I was a mess emotionally. I really struggled for a long time. I've had a lot of support from friends and family who helped me get through this. I worked hard to get to where I was (Sergeant) before he fired me."

Black is happy to be serving a new community in law enforcement. She is working on putting the Almont experience, and the strain of the resulting lawsuit, behind her and looking forward to what the future holds for her.

Attorney for Black provides documentation

"...evidence of gender discrimination and retaliation"

Below are excerpts from Attorney Sarah Thomas, documents that were part of the legal proceedings in the case of Laura Black vs the Village of Almont and PD Chief Andy Martin. All

comments are from Attorney Thomas, unless otherwise noted:

The federal court complaint was filed on Sept. 2, 2021. The oral argument was held, where the judge ruled in favor on Def's motion for summary judgment, on February 7, 2023. The matter settled outside of court in December of 2023.

Despite her overall excellent performance as a police officer, per Defendant, Plaintiff was fired solely because of alleged violations of responsibilities on March 27, 2021, when Plaintiff and two other officers responded to a routine call at a park in Almont. The events that occurred are captured on film.

Judge Matthew Leitman, concluded that the officers' complaints did not align with the video footage of the call.

He stated: "When I read the accounts of the incident you get the sense that there was a lot of bad stuff that happened. And you don't get that feeling, at all, from the video ... And as I am watching this video, I'm thinking there's nothing happening in this video. This is a — this is a nothingburger... And the notion that there was any serious misconduct...doesn't seem to be borne out by the video."

Judge Leitman also noted that Chief Martin admitted that Plaintiff did not violate a single "Supervisor's Responsibility", as set forth by Defendant's policy, during the March 27 call."

Chief Martin admitted that the two officers who filed the complaint, per his request, also did many things wrong on the scene on March 27—yet neither were disciplined or counseled in any way.

Thomas says, "Chief Martin himself testified that Plaintiff had previously handled "hundreds" of runs to "hundreds of "scenes" and was an "outstanding" officer."

The record evidence proves that the termination was a sham designed to hide the true reason—gender discrimination and retaliation. There is direct evidence that after Plaintiff was promoted to sergeant, several of her male subordinates could not countenance being supervised by a woman.

Chief Martin admitted that Plaintiff was called a "b...ch" and a "c..t" and that male officers urged him to remove her. One longtime APD officer testified that it "became apparent" to him that other officers wanted Plaintiff terminated as a sergeant at least in part "because of her gender."

Judge Leitman agreed, holding that the "nasty comments were anchored clearly in her gender" such that "a jury could find that this was sufficiently severe and pervasive to be a hostile work environment."

Thomas said the Chief was a willing supporter of the sexist officers. He blatantly violated the APD policy on sex harassment, which requires that complaints be investigated, and a report be issued.

Over three years, Plaintiff made multiple verbal complaints, which the Chief does not deny.

On September 16, 2018, she made a formal, written complaint against the Chief and others, citing to violations of the policy.

Thomas pointed out at a hearing, she (Black) stated she believed her gender was the reason she was being fired. None of these complaints were investigated— they were ignored. Judge Leitman found that this, too, was evidence of gender discrimination and retaliation."

Chief Martin sent Plaintiff a termination letter on April 30, 2021. It was filled with false statements. Per Judge Leitman, "the termination notice that — I mean, it's worth reading,

because I think it lays bare kind of what's going on here."