

The Non-Retention of RFT

It is well-known to many in the Glennallen area how the School Board relieved me of my position as itinerant music teacher for the Copper River School District. However, as time goes on, many of the details of the affair may fade from memory; meanwhile, I continue to work and suffer under the shadow of the implied disgrace that people naturally associate with the term "non-retention." Because I want this website to reveal as much of my professional identity as is appropriate, for the purposes of outreach and professional advancement, I feel it is necessary to summarize the events of March-November 2007 for those who do not know the story. It is a very dramatic story and every detail of it is entertaining, but, as brevity is the soul of wit, I will be as brief as possible:

In March of 2007, I was informed by two high school principals that there was insufficient support on the Copper River School Board for me to be retained and get tenure. I accepted this and wrote a letter of resignation. When the word got out (it took about a day) there was a general outcry from people all over the district begging me to fight the decision, they were behind me, please stay, etc. The next school board meeting, on April 3rd, was assaulted by over 80 people who came out in support of me. 23 people spoke--it took 1 1/2 hours. There were over fifty letters written, a full-page add was taken out and 15 letters to the editor were published in the Copper River Record; the students in Kenny Lake had tee-shirts made up protesting my dismissal. In response to this demonstration of support, the principal of Glennallen High wrote a letter recommending me for tenure, and the superintendent gave me his unqualified endorsement. Thinking that was the end of it, I and the whole district breathed a sigh of relief, especially since at the April 3rd meeting, the chairman of the board had stated that my retention was not up to them. Consequently, I suspended my job searches and focussed my efforts on preparing for Regionals. Then, on the first meeting of May, the Board dropped a bombshell--they voted on a movement to retain me 6 to 1 AGAINST. Nobody saw this coming, since nobody could believe that the Board would so flagrantly ignore the clearly expressed will of the majority of the people. In spite of the public reaction (which I am told was historic) the school board rejected me for rehire.

The reason the board gave, in spite of voluminous testimony to the contrary, was that I was rude and insensitive to students. Their letter of cause quoted heavily from a letter I wrote to them just a month earlier confessing some of the undeniable consequences of my Asperger's Syndrome disability. Asperger's has been the bane of my existence for my entire life, and no matter how well-intentioned I have been, that psychological blind spot has caused me no

end of grief, and has constituted the primary reason that professional advancement commensurate with my talents and accomplishments has been denied me. Many people at the previous board meeting, and in their letters to the board, did not fail to mention these eccentric behaviors, but in a curiously affectionate way; everybody, including the superintendent, emphasized that my sometimes quirky social interactions were a small price to pay for the quality of education the children were receiving from me. At this point the public outrage reached a fever pitch, and I was advised to seek legal representation.

In Anchorage, I found a lawyer who spoke for me at a formal hearing in June. The board upheld their 6-1 vote against me. My lawyer then filed a complaint with the Alaska Human Rights Commission, claiming that I was a victim of prejudicial treatment, and was fired because of my Asperger's Syndrome, a clinically, legally recognized disability. The HRC stepped in as mediator, and, in November I received a settlement of \$76,000. This is hardly compensation for destroying an entire projected career, but it will put my boys through school. Of course, with that non-retention letter in my file, I will never teach public school again; never mind that my kids got more top honors at Regional and State music festivals than ever before in the history of Glennallen, never mind that a whole district rose up in support of me, never mind that the superintendent says I am one of the three best music teachers he has known during his 40 years in Alaska, and the principal of Kenny Lake says I'm the best music teacher that has come to the area in the past 20 years; never mind all that--if there is something negative to focus on, that's what people will focus on. Asperger's is particularly destructive at job interviews, and getting that position in Glennallen was a fluke; even though I totally distinguished myself doing the job, it is highly unlikely that anyplace else will ever give me another chance.

Meanwhile, I have remained in Glennallen and have established a small music conservatory. I have a substantial class of private students, some from the public school, some home-schoolers. I am making almost as much in take-home pay as I was in the public school--no health benefits, no FICA, but more than enough to live on. I am involved in more potent forms of outreach now than ever before and have several programs going including an after-school kiddy chorus, a community chorus, a community orchestra, a chamber music program, and a jazz program. The conservatory has extended itself to Valdez, and I expect soon to be conducting a similar set of ensembles down there. I am also teaching music appreciation at Prince William Sound Community College. I am having a composition played at UAF this spring, the same piece in Anaheim, in 2010, and I just received an "Honorable Mention" in an international flute composition competition. So you can see, I'm very happy with the change in lifestyle, and with

my professional advancement OUTSIDE the public institutional arena; my conscience sometimes smarts at the idea that my gifts would be better used in the public school where more children would be served, but, on the other hand, my sphere of influence is already quite wide, and, if the outreach events I envision can actually be arranged, my final constituency (fan base?) might be even bigger.

I think my story is important from a number of standpoints, primarily vis a vis the Asperger's connection: the legal records abound with cases of students with Asperger's syndrome suing school systems for prejudicial treatment, but my unextensive research was unable to uncover a single instance of a TEACHER successfully suing a school system. Thousands of aspies have reported prejudicial treatment in books and websites, but there are generally few success stories. Although I sometimes pine for my old job, I consider my story generally to be a success. If this story were more generally known it might contribute to the growing public consciousness of Asperger's Syndrome as a real thing, and maybe help prepare it to face the growing number of aspies being born every day. Moreover, if I AM ever seriously considered for an academic position in the future, I hope my potential employers will read this and consider seriously who they are dealing with, and what might be at stake for their students.

Glennallen, AK
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