

Racist and sexist termination at the University of Washington or
“Working in John Wayne country!”

When asked to be consultant to the North West AIDS Education Center (NWAETC) of the UW Center for Health Education Research (CHER) in fall 2001, it was an opportunity long in the waiting. Imagine, working in the ivory tower, the last bastion of racism!

The NWAETC received a Minority AIDS Initiative grant from the Ryan White CARE act, which funds most AIDS/HIV care in the U.S. It trains health providers in five states in the NW.

The Black congressional caucus re-authorized the almost 2 billion dollar act, only if monies were set aside to provide services to minority populations. HRSA (Health Resources and Services administration) administers of the Ryan White ACT had consistently refused to provide services to minority communities.

NWAETC had not made in roads into the native communities in the 5 states 1 ½ year into its grant. Once hired, we spearheaded and coordinated five conferences in three states with two on reservations and provide training to 200 health care providers to native communities within the remaining 6 months.

Impressed, I was asked to remain with the NWAETC, July, 1, 2001, as Tribal Liaison. I insisted on similar pay as others. A lower rate was reasoned as lacking a master degree, though I noted that all the masters and PhDs. were not able to produce in 1 ½ years what we produced in the last six months.

Months later at the annual retreat, the staff consisted of majority Caucasian women (almost 50) and three men. A historic review of the organization by Ann Downer, the founder, stated that most research was dominated by men. CHER had formed for women to do research and with a commitment to one another for continual employment. When I mentioned that it seemed to lack racial and gender diversity, the staff defended how committed to diversity they were.

Later in other meetings I spoke up to note that the commitment to diversity was not being implemented. When asked where and how job announcements were made and where consultants were sought, responses were lacking and suggestions were not taken beyond just listening.

At one point the head of the NWAETC stated that “minorities didn’t know how to write resumes...”! It needed to be mentioned to that staff meeting that we could all be replaced by minorities with as good and even better resumes, including myself. I further stated that to voice such a comment showed a limited exposure and lack of cultural competence.

So I focused on conceptualizing the TRIBAL BEAR project, bringing AIDS care training services directly on to reservations. The effort to get a commitment of hiring minorities for each part of the minority component of the grant to better communicate with the communities was not seriously addressed. (I insisted and hired many natives.)

Later at an annual gathering of several hundred health providers in California in April 2002, during a cultural competence session, I presented short bursts of Indian data. One was that the 500 years of sexual molestation and abuse by the catholic priests could have possibly contributed, as learned behavior, the anal sex practices of male to male in Latin American communities...separate of the practices of the gay communities.

I was reprimanded and told the gay communities had been insulted and didn't know what I was talking about. (Though I have worked for and with many gays over time) In later discussion with the gay nurse on staff and noting my gay relatives, he confided that it made me family. He stated that gays had historically found sanctuary in the churches as a place of refuge and that as long as a child was 16 years old, it was age of consent between a priest and a child. This was most revolting and when shared with my supervisor, she stated I had no right to question gays. I challenged this condoning of breach of trust perspective and violation of child as justifiable, but to no avail.

A laptop computer given to me contained many gay pornographic sites that kept showing up when I went on line.

Several staff laughed when I brought my concern that I found this offensive. After being insistent that they reformat the computer, the tech person would not let me do it rather paid someone over 140.00. It came back with all the porn sites and email pictures still popping up.

This brought into question if the tech person understood what was required to remove the offensive sites. Finally after several re attempts another computer was secured for me. The next person, also native, to have that computer experienced the same porn surfacing.

When Alaska was to be a next service site; the contracted person stated she could not find any minorities to hire. We had found out she was going to hire her Caucasian woman friend.

My self and co worker, Ron Baines, a native from Alaska, wrote her a letter with many helpful sites to post job announcements to gather a greater pool of applicants. IHI, AIPA, Tribal newspapers, etc. We were reprimanded by the head of the NWAETC, Bernadette LaLonde, for daring to trying to do her job. We reminded her that my position as Tribal liaison was to make linkages.

Ron had applied for the job himself, but I was told "he did not fit into our style..." by Shelia St. Sebastian my immediate supervisor.

Numerous occasions in the lunch room exposed me to the racial ignorance by comments of insult to natives such as "Indians invented everything". This occurred when I shared stories of the potatoes of South America, after a co worker brought her garden harvest.

One day I ran into a minority woman coming out of an office followed by 6 office workers in the spring of 2002. I asked what was going on, which seemed to surprise all and I was not answered by anyone and all walked away.

The interview committee, composed of friends and co-workers of the acting director, for had interviewed one token minority for the position of CHER Director. I had mentioned that it could be a conflict of interest and that certain titles of the civil rights act could be getting violated the way job announcements were not so inclusive. The acting director was then hired as the new director. I was not answered on these issues by anyone.

Remarks that I was not sensitive to women's feelings and comfort levels soon surfaced, and that I was gender and gay biased. I asked for specifics and would not be given any. It was stated that I should just know these things.

The Tribal BEAR project got national recognition, and the head of the NWAETC stated in the early summer 2002, that she would publish in prestige's journal. I reminded her to mention that people without master or PhDs had found innovative solutions for their communities. It was not long that a lot more efforts seemed to be underway to find fault with me.

It was brought to my attention to try to find a native woman PhD to help. I located one and over time I found out it was their desire to have her on full time. (She was later hired as my replacement.)

At a conference in California on September 2002 an incident occurred where as the facilitator my co worker from Montana did not follow a suggestion to lower music. I repeated and had to insist and speak loud enough over the music to finally refocus her attention to the program. This incident was used to try to say I was not a workable person to be with.

This native woman, Phyllis Scharr, is willing to testify how they tried to get her to say sexist views against me.

I had repeatedly tried to use the conflict resolution process with all the staff should anyone have any problems with me and never was the process allowed to be used.

Earlier in the year I started to uncover how the minority monies budget was being manipulated. It supported other positions at CHER and without much effort grant objectives were consistently not reached. Monies would then be returned to HRSA, and HRSA would then return back the funds as unrestricted funds. CHER would go on a spending spree for equipment and hiring each other as consultants for some other of their programs.

I mentioned to the staff that I found these manipulations as thief from the minority communities and at the expense of those suffering from HIV/AIDS. These parasitic practices resulted from no personal investment in the communities of color to see success.

With the AIDS epidemic now 75% minorities contracting HIV and the resources at AETC in 90% non minority staff, it would be only logical that historic racial biases baggage would impact effective implementation of services.

Trying to have native doctors trained in AIDS care was not supported. In fact a Doctor Lamebull McDonald was rebuffed when he asked for same pay scale of other non native doctors at the NWAETC. Part of capacity building in communities of color is the economic impact of hiring from the community. It helps reduce the variable of poverty as a risk factor. To not hire minorities constitutes a continuation of colonialism. It was not long afterwards, on October 22, 2002, that I was brought in a meeting and handed a termination letter. When asked for specific reasons why I was being fired and who had made this decision, exact details were not given to me.

The Internal Conflict Resolution office of the UW told me a 60 day policy for response and concluded investigation would ensue. Five months later a report was mailed to me 10 days before statute limitations for filing with the Washington human rights commission. The report was sanitized and all the witnesses I submitted were not interviewed. Even repeated emails to the investigator to interview them did not produce an interview. A complicity of the University and HRSA seemed to exist in my efforts to reveal Title 6 and 7 violations, as both did nothing.

I went to the EEOC where without the witnesses testimony included, gave me right to sue papers. It expires August 29.

In front of my house is a teepee and sign "UW a racist sexist workplace". People stop and let me know of similar experiences and how the UW tells them 60 days for investigations ...only to conclude days before statute of limitation expire. This shows a concerted effort by the UW lawyers to bury the issues of racism and sexism practices in hiring and discriminatory practices for political briefs on issues of gender, gay issues, and racial equality.

I reported these practices to the HRSA top brass, as overseers of Ryan White CARE act, and the Audit departments of the UW and HRSA, all to no avail. It is time services and research is mandated to have community participation as to its needs and solutions. The hiring of community members will have the motivation of vested feelings to the community and better reflect the new face of HIV. The economic benefits of employment will contribute to the capacity building to self determination in a community and improve the people's lives. A very pietistic mentality exists in western academia based on linear thinking. It does not and cannot incorporate more natural holistic coconsciousness, practiced by many indigenous communities. Getting privileged people to understand their cultural incompetence and racial bias is most frustrating. This cultural incompetence contributes to ineffective service delivery!

I strongly believe this case could do much to expose these practices and that my termination was due to racist and sexist reasons that dominate and are condoned at the work environments of the UW. Let's bring down this last bastion of racism!

Robert free galvan
2067221191
robtfree@earthlink.net