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'The mayor didn't think anybody would care'  
(Daniel Sturm interviewed Genice Rhodes-Reed, the Human Resources Department director fired by Lansing Mayor David Hollister, on Monday. Excerpts follow.)

Q: Robert Johnson, Hollister's chief of staff, says that poor job performance, not racism, was the reason you were asked to resign. Is that true?

A: Of course not. The mayor found my performance was good. When I met with him in April he said, "I hope you decide to stay." We received the National Leader City's Award last year to improve K-12 education. After I had put together different partners, we decided to focus on middle schools. In fact I had a meeting scheduled at 7 a.m. the next morning after I was fired. Moreover the National Leadership Program had to cancel a meeting due to my resignation.

Genice Rhodes-Reed

Q: Why did you have to leave office then?

A: The mayor is led by certain people. I believe the Personnel Department's director, Sharon Bommarito, was behind the terminations of Joe Graves (former chief of staff), Freddie Thomas (former special assistant to Hollister), Yvonne Christopher (a former Human Resources Department director) and me.

Q: Freddie Thomas said that his and your dismissal were part of a conscious decision to get rid of city employees who used to work with Joe Graves Jr. (who was fired after drunken-driving charges), and worked for improving opportunities for minorities.

A: That's true. After Joe Graves' dismissal, Sharon Bommarito bragged they were going to get rid of me. Then the rumors started that I would get fired. In my understanding the personnel director was very open and blatant about this.

Q: How was your relationship with Sharon Bommarito?

A: I disagreed with the way hiring people were handled. And she didn't like that. I felt she wanted to run my department. Frankly, I believe she engineered the whole thing. Half of her staff personnel left within the three years I was there. I only had one staff person to leave, although the mayor and others – and that's what I call institutional racism – didn't say anything about her relationship to her staff. It's a different standard. Her staff was afraid to speak. The turnover may be the highest in Personnel of any departments.

Q: Why did the situation escalate like this?

A: The mayor didn't think anybody would care, because he knew the African-American community was fractured. I think it has been irritating to him that people have questioned his judgment.

Q: You formed the Unity in Community Forum after 9/11. Will you be forced to resign as the group's coordinator?

A: The mayor doesn't have jurisdiction over what I do as a private citizen. Whether or not I continue in my role providing leadership to the coalition is not even an issue. But I didn't want to have attention focused on me. I believe the focus has to be on what draws us together and not what tears us apart.

Q: The Unity in Community Forum received strong support by the department you used to work for. Can this support continue with you coordinating the forum?

A: I don't think the city should drive the structure. Types like our group will effectively promote social justice. Therefore they have to be autonomous. The mayor is not free to determine what I do with my personal time with a volunteer organization.

Q: Is there a power game about the group's leadership?

A: I am not interested in a power game. In my understanding the question was raised at the last board meeting. Bob Johnson supposedly said the mayor wanted Willard Walker (the interim Human Relations director) to lead the coalition. That's where the conflict came from.

Q: Doesn't the Unity in Community Forum have a constitution?

A: It doesn't. I had initially brought in different people to facilitate the meeting and I encouraged group members to fulfill the leadership role. That didn't happen. They said, "We want you to do it." That's how I came to do it, not because I was hired by the city.

Q: Do you think an election could help to clarify the situation?

A: I think that would be a good idea. We've discussed this issue earlier. This is not something that has just come up because I was terminated. Also I'd be willing to meet with the mayor. My concern about the coalition was so strong that even after I'd been terminated, I was willing to stand with the mayor in unity, to say, "We've got to stay on our course."

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