

Blacks fear surge in City Hall firings

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Mayor's former assistant says he too was fired, reports threats

By DANIEL STURM

At a Michigan State University conference in April 1999, the director of Lansing's Human Relations and Community Services Department, Genice Rhodes-Reed, talked about the "Rhetoric and Reality" of anti-discrimination policies. Her edited volume, "Race in 21st Century America," focused on the underrepresentation of minorities in higher-level occupations.

According to the book, women held only 3 percent to 5 percent of senior level jobs at major corporations. Of these few women, a mere 5 percent are minorities.

Two weeks ago Rhodes-Reed belonged to an exclusive group of minority women in power. She enforced equal opportunity policies for the city government. Today, her name is included on a growing list of African Americans who used to work in high-ranking positions for Lansing's city government but were let go. Her three predecessors as director, Mike Murphy, Yvonne Christopher and Art Walker - all African Americans - were either terminated or forced to resign. When Mayor David Hollister's chief of staff, Joe Graves Jr., was dismissed in July 2001 after his arrest on drunken-driving charges, rumors began to rise about the suspiciously high turnover rate of high-ranking African-American city employees. Michael Navabi, the former director of public safety, then resigned in February, and Freddie Thomas, special assistant to the mayor, was let go in the same month. With the recent dismissal of Rhodes-Reed, people began to believe rumors about a power game against African Americans in City Hall have truth to them.

"We were the ones that provided fair treatment to minority employees. If you remove those pieces of the puzzle, you really have free range," says Thomas, speaking for the first time about his mysterious dismissal in February. "This was a strategic decision. If you look at the people being terminated since January, you have to think this was a mechanism designed to position the administration to more easily eliminate minority employees at the lower level."

For three and a half years, Thomas served as Hollister's special assistant and did many of the mayor's public speaking engagements. He told City Pulse he'd felt absolutely loyal to the administration and that his Feb. 6 dismissal came as a complete shock. "There was never a question of my performance, I've never received a negative evaluation," says Thomas, pastor at the Vessel of Praise, a Baptist church on the west side of Lansing. Two weeks before his dismissal, the mayor's staff reviewed information on Thomas' educational background. When he asked for reasons, "they told me they could neither confirm nor deny my credentials, because my credentials are based on theology."

Today Thomas believes "this was really just the smoke screen they utilized to try to attack me." After he'd left office, the pastor received anonymous phone calls from key persons at City Hall telling him that "if I said anything negative towards the administration or the mayor, they would stop at nothing to discredit me." So Thomas, who is married with two sons, kept quiet because "that's something very scary for your family." However, upon hearing the ominous circumstances of Rhodes-Reed's forced resignation, he felt it was time to talk. "I can't get a job in Lansing anyway. Why do I need to keep quiet?"

The 37-year-old minister fears a sudden lack on minority rights representation. "There's no governing body who will stand up and talk against things that aren't ethically right. There's no checkpoint that says hey, you've gone too far. I think the City of Lansing and its leaders have failed to provide that checkpoint. I don't want people at lower levels to have to go through the types of things Genice and I went through."

Richard Clement was one of those lower-level employees for whom Thomas fears. The story of the African-American software analyst who worked for City Hall's computer department shares frightening parallels. Three policemen and a German shepherd arrived to escort Clement from the office where he'd worked for the past year. Clement, who was scared to death when he saw the cops coming, intuitively reached for his digital camera to document his dismissal. The police confiscated the camera and held Clement for two hours in custody while they tried to figure out how to download the photographs he'd taken. Clement was later able to retrieve some of the chip.

Clement, who now teaches at Lansing Community College, had experienced another of the seemingly arbitrary series of personnel screenings at City Hall. At a hearing the administration blamed him for giving false information about his occupational background. They said he should have listed his work for the State administration in 1997 (although "the form just offered space for the last three employers," says Clement). Rhodes-Reed, Thomas and Clement were each given just 15 minutes to pack their things and leave the building, "an approach that seemed particularly humiliating," Clement said. "It really hurt me, because I loved this job and I had a perfect rating."

The most recent instance in the series of high-ranking city officials to leave office was the dismissal of Sharon Dade, deputy director of the Personnel Department. Dade, who's now working for the Volunteers of America, was unwilling to comment on the circumstances surrounding her leave.

Members of the Human Relations Department's advisory board were very upset about the unexpected firing of Rhodes-Reed. The committee's chairman, Robert J. Egan, resigned in protest. "The Mayor Hollister in office today is a very different person from the one I helped to get elected," Egan declared. What puzzles Egan the most is, "Why does the mayor relate well to people of color as victims, but when they are experts, he seems to have difficulties."

Board members met Thursday, June 6, with two department officials, interim director Willard Walker and Deputy Director Kip Gomoll, and Hollister's chief of staff Robert Johnson to ask why Rhodes-Reed was

dismissed. They were told "a procedure had been followed." The board's secretary, Amy Hodgin ("The whole thing has come as shock to me"), wasn't happy to hear such empty phrases. But on Saturday she declared that she would remain on the board because "nothing would be accomplished with my resignation. That doesn't mean that I am not upset with what happened with Genice."

Other members like Noel Copiaco, one of the co-founders of the Mid-Michigan Asian Pacific American Association, also expressed their complete disbelief. Like other sources with whom City Pulse spoke, he doesn't consider the mayor to be a racist. But "maybe he's a person who has other priorities." Copiaco suddenly remembered the first time he questioned if the mayor really stood behind minority groups. Back in September 1994, Grand Avenue in Lansing was renamed Cesar Chavez Avenue for the Chicano rights activist, but citizens voted in June 1995 to revert to the original name. "Hollister could have done more to prevent that."

One man who understands City Hall's power structures is Graves, the mayor's former chief of staff. "It almost seems like a mob mentality," he said. "I don't think the mayor made an independent decision to terminate Genice." Graves draws attention instead to Hollister's strategy group, consisting of: the mayor's executive assistant, David Wiener, the PR consultant Stephen Serkaian and the finance, personnel, planning and management services directors. He believes that this strategy group whispers in Hollister's ear on such moves.

As another source reports, Rhodes-Reed had a serious conflict with one strategy group member, the personnel director, Sharon Bommarito. "Often I was put in the position to resolve conflicts between the two of them." It was Rhodes-Reed's responsibility to enforce equal employment opportunity goals for the city. From time to time she would raise issues about the hiring process, and about the testing procedures used, which seemed to vary from one applicant pool to the next. "The tests on occasion weren't really relevant to the job they were trying to hire for. That set in motion other dynamics that resulted in some tension," asserts Graves.

With the departure of seven high profile African-American employees in the last six years, there seems no doubt that there are some tensions. Furthermore, Graves thinks there's also a high turnover rate among low-profile minority employees. "If you look at the number of employees that came into the city over the last five years you'll find a disproportionate number of African-Americans who did not complete their probation period. My guess is you will also find a disproportionate number who were terminated."

The questions Graves raises remain unfortunately unanswered. Neither Bommarito nor Johnson could be reached to shed light on Graves' hypothesis or to confirm whether the city kept records on the dismissal and resignation rate of minority employees.

Equal employment opportunities appear quite progressive within the city government. This is, as members of the department's advisory board point out, a compliment to Rhodes-Reed's competence. With 12 percent, African-American employees are currently overrepresented (8 percent of Lansing residents are African American) and fill 140 of 1,181 permanent jobs, according to the city's survey at the end of March. Asian Americans, at 1 percent, are slightly underrepresented (2 percent of general population). Hispanic American employees make up 6 percent of the permanent workforce, while this group represents only 4 percent of Greater Lansing's population.

"To some extent we were very successful," says Thomas regarding his work with Rhodes-Reed and Graves to bring diversity into the city. "People who for instance look at the Lansing Police Department will see it is

a fixed issue. The question is: Will it remain that way?"

Whereas there has been no serious revolt against the administration's controversial firing policy so far, the mayor may face significant problems Sunday, June 16, at the Unity in Community Forum (3 p.m. in the MSU Union's Green Room). Rhodes-Reed set up this multicultural community group after Sept. 11 to promote a no-tolerance policy on ethnic intimidation. Since then the group's objectives have remained on Hollister's main agenda. Although dismissed from her post at the Human Relations Department, close sources say Rhodes-Reed is determined not to give up her leading role at the Unity in Community Forum.

She has the backing of almost everyone in this group, whose members include

representatives from the city's Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious communities, as well as the American Red Cross and the Lansing police. Will the mayor take away funding if Rhodes-Reed keeps the position? Will the mayor try to push through the interim human-relations director, Willard Walker, to become the new forum leader? A source working for the city government guessed: "That's really her baby, not the mayor's. Thus she will win."

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