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# When breastfeeding conflicts with morés in the mall

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When breastfeeding conflicts with morés in the mall

By DANIEL STURM

Vanessa Vicknair moved to Lansing from Seattle five years ago. She thought both cities were progressive □ until recently.

On June 12, she went shopping with her sister-in law Kelly Vicknair and friend Jessica Chapman-King at the Lansing Mall. The three mothers were tired, and their children hungry. They spotted a comfortable couch in the mall's designated family area. When Vanessa began breastfeeding her 8-week old daughter, a security guard approached and told her she should use the nursing room at the end of the hall, or otherwise stop breastfeeding. "He told me I was on private property and breaking indecent exposure laws," Vicknair said.

Vicknair said she was so shocked by his remarks that her hands started shaking. She told the guard that she had never heard of a mother being told to stop nursing her child and that Michigan law protects a mother's right to breastfeed in public. "Do you understand that you can't stop us from nursing? The stuff you are doing used to maybe happen in the 1980s, in a back town, or maybe in a southern state!"

Vicknair said the guard replied that he wasn't going to argue with her and that he wasn't aware of any state law that allowed breastfeeding in the public.

Legislation protecting a woman's right to breastfeed wherever they go with their baby exists today in more than half the states, including Michigan. In 1994 Michigan legislators amended various sections of the state criminal code to expressly state that public nudity does not include a woman's breastfeeding of a baby.

The first legal battle over breastfeeding was fought in 1977, after New York mother Barbara Damon was banished from a public swimming pool after refusing to nurse her infant in the ladies' room. As a result, her family's pool pass was revoked, and the village enacted an ordinance forbidding public breastfeeding at the pool. Eventually the ordinance was repealed, Damon was paid damages and a facility was built where all mothers could feed their babies. More recently, New Jersey passed a law in 1997 levying a fine for anyone who denied a woman the right to breastfeed in public.

Was the Lansing Mall security guard breaking Michigan law? The mall's marketing director, Jodi Hoeg, said that she

believes what happened between the security guard and Vicknair must have been a misunderstanding. "We do allow people to breastfeed in the shopping center," she said.

Hoeg said that security personnel were trained to approach nursing mothers to let them know that a nursing room was available as a special service, not as a requirement. "The nursing room is a fairly new amenity that a lot of customers are probably not aware of," Hoeg explained. During a renovation in November 2002, a new family bathroom was added to the Lansing Mall, as well as a nursing room and changing room for toddlers. "I think our security officer approached this woman to let her know this room is available."

But Vicknair said this is not what happened. She and Chapman-King claimed that the guard told her she was breaking the law and that she had to use the nursing room. Vicknair said the guard used the expression "committing indecent exposure." Added Vicknair: "He also told me that I absolutely had to quit, because I was on private property and it was up to them."

Vicknair stood her ground, however, and after she finished nursing her daughter, she went to the security office to talk to the guard's supervisor, and file a complaint. But the guard said that his supervisor was on vacation and wouldn't be back until Monday.

The women then walked to the guest service desk, where the service representative told them they had received many complaints from shoppers uncomfortable with mothers breastfeeding in public, which is why the Lansing Mall staff was directed to inform them about the nursing lounge.

Vicknair said she was outraged by the idea that nursing women were a target for complaints. "I don't think anybody even saw us other than the security guard," she said. After all, weren't they sitting in the "family area," away from the main mall? Added Vicknair: "I had my daughter eight weeks ago, and I was wearing a maternity shirt and a lot of fabric. Nothing was exposed. If you walked by, you would have seen the back of my daughter's head."

Vicknair said that a security guard followed the three mothers out of the mall, and they had felt as if they were being treated like criminals.

Her friend, Chapman-King, said she was shocked to see that a woman breastfeeding could be treated with such disrespect in Lansing. She had nursed her first daughter Eva until age 3-1/2 without problems, although she had done so in a number of public places and malls in the Greater Lansing area. She recalled breastfeeding her 6-month-old daughter in the middle of the Lansing Mall Food Court two months ago. Chapman-King said that usually if someone notices a nursing mother, they simply look the other way.

The La Leche League, an international advocacy group for breastfeeding that maintains consultative status with the United Nations Children's Fund, traces hostility against breastfeeding mothers back to outdated moral taboos in the West, which over the last century have been used to deter women from breastfeeding. The League points out that the increased legal recognition of the right to breastfeed in public has been one step toward helping society become less judgmental and more supportive. "But society's views and taboos are not easily changed," argued the late La Leche League leader Elizabeth Baldwin in a report published on the group's Web site, at [www.lalecheleague.org](http://www.lalecheleague.org).

Many state governments support breastfeeding programs partly due to cost savings. Hundreds of millions of tax dollars continue to be used to purchase artificial baby milk. Government agencies also support breastfeeding because it provides significant health benefits.

Babies who are not breastfed have higher rates of death, cancer, diabetes, respiratory illnesses, allergies, obesity and developmental delays. Breastfeeding also has health benefits for the mother, including delayed return to fertility and decreased risk of cancer of the breast and ovaries.

In 2002, the World Health Assembly adopted UNICEF's global strategy to create an environment that empowers women to breastfeed exclusively for the first six months, and continue breastfeeding for two years or more. The U.S. Surgeon General recommends that babies be breastfed for at least one year.

Vicknair said she's not simply going to get over her "horrible" experience at the Lansing Mall. She's asking other mothers to share their stories and organize a nurse-in, which is a protest event of nursing mothers and their families and friends. Vicknair said she would like to see a large rally in the center of the Lansing Mall to "raise awareness and

let them know that they can't do what they did."

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