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Fired for Being Muslim, N.J. Teacher Says

By LORRAINE BAILEY

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NEWARK (CN) - A New Jersey high school ordered a history teacher not to "mention Islam in class," reprimanded her for showing a movie about Nobel Laureate Malala Yusufzai - which a white history teacher showed without problems - then fired her because her Muslim religion causes "trouble," the teacher claims in court.

Sireen Hashem sued Hunterdon County, its Board of Education and superintendent, Hunterdon Central Regional High School and its principal and two teacher/supervisors on Monday in Federal Court.

Hashem, a Muslim-American woman of Palestinian descent, taught U.S. history teacher at Hunterdon High, in Flemington, from 2013-2015.

Hashem says that on Oct. 13, 2013, as part of her continuing training, she sat in on another teacher's U.S. history class: "a non-Arab, non-Muslim, non-Palestinian, Caucasian female."

That teacher showed a video about Malala Yusufzai, who was awarded the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize for continuing to advocate for girls' and women's education after the Taliban shot her in the head. Yusufzai, then 17, is the youngest person ever to be awarded a Nobel Prize.

Hashem says in her lawsuit that "at the suggestion of" the other teacher, she showed "the same video in her U.S. history class later that day."

Eleven days later, she says, her supervisor in the Social Studies Department, defendant Robert Zywicki, summoned her to a meeting and told her that their principal, defendant Susan Cooley, had "received a complaint from the parent of a student about plaintiff's use of the Malala Yusufzai video during a lesson. Defendant Zywicki told plaintiff that she could not teach current events in the same manner as her non-Arab, non-Palestinian and non-Muslim colleagues," according to the complaint.

Her next problem came on March 31, 2014, Hashem says, when she was "invited to participate in an elective class wherein a book called 'Lemon Tree' was discussed. Plaintiff was asked to translate a Skype conversation between the students and Mr. Bashir, an individual whose experiences were recounted in the book."

A parent then called the high school to complain. The parent, whose student was in the elective class, but not in Hashem's class, "complained to the high school administration about the use of the book 'Lemon Tree' in the curriculum and about plaintiff's participation in the class," according to the complaint.

It got worse. On Sept. 8, 2014, that student, who is identified by name in the complaint, "posted allegations that plaintiff's brother was a terrorist on Facebook. He also posted that plaintiff was anti-Israel, was attempting to instill anti-Semitic views in students and warned that plaintiff may hurt students who did not agree with her," Hashem says in the lawsuit.

This came after another incident, in which Hashem says her principal unfairly singled her out. In May 2014, she says, she "used a document-based-question commonly used by teachers throughout the United States. The exercise asked students to compare the actions of John Brown at Harper's Ferry to the actions of Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2001."

On May 9 that year, principal Cooley called her into the office and told her a parent, unidentified in the complaint, had complained about the Harper's Ferry lesson.

"Defendant Cooley told plaintiff that she should not mention Islam or the Middle East in her class. Defendant Cooley further stated that plaintiff should not bring her culture, life experience or background into the classroom," according to the complaint.

Then came the allegations that her brother is a terrorist, which the student posted on Sept. 8, 2014.

On Sept. 9, she was called to the principal's office by loudspeaker. There, she says, she was "confronted" by principal Cooley and defendant school Superintendent Cristina Steffner, "who accused her of not sticking to the curriculum, questioned her about her teaching and how it related to the common core, accused her of discriminating against Jewish students, and also questioned her about her place of birth, her family, and her personal life."

Two days later, on Sept. 11 of all days, the superintendent summoned her again.

"Defendant Steffner told plaintiff that she caused trouble because she was Palestinian since the day she started working at the high school, making reference to the Malala Yusufzai video," the complaint states. "When plaintiff countered that Lindsay Wagner [the other history teacher] used the same video and it was not a problem, defendant Steffner slammed her hand on the table and said, 'You are not Lindsay.' Unlike plaintiff, Lindsay Wagner is not Arab, not Palestinian and not Muslim."

To top it off, she says, a rabbi and several parents then complained to Cooley, Steffner and the Board of Education and demanded that she be fired, "solely because of her heritage and religion."

She was fired in April this year. She says her new supervisor in the department, defendant Rebecca Lucas, who got the job after Zywicki left, told her that she was being fired because "Cooley and Steffner 'wanted her gone.'"

She appealed her firing to the Board of Education, which rejected it in June. She says 60 students and parents attended the school board meeting, but the school board attorney refused to let them in.

Then in July, she says, two FBI agents came to her door. The FBI agents told her "that they had received information that plaintiff, while at the June 15 meeting of the defendant board, stated that 'they will be sorry if she is fired.' Plaintiff denied ever making the statement. Since the defendant board was in executive session and the only people present when the plaintiff spoke were the plaintiff and the board members, this erroneous and defamatory allegation must have originated from the defendant board."

Hashem seeks lost wages and punitive damages for employment discrimination, disparate treatment, retaliation, conspiracy, constitutional violations, discriminatory firing and defamation.


She is represented by Tariq Hussain with Hussain, Altaf & Khan, in Ridgefield Park.

The school did not immediately respond to telephone and emailed requests for comment on Tuesday.

Flemington, pop. 4,600, 20 miles north of Trenton, is 62.5 percent white and 26.2 percent Latino, according to city-data.com. Its per capita household income of \$52,376 is 25.4 percent below the statewide median of \$70,165.

The RateMyTeachers.com website, checked Wednesday morning, featured four glowing recommendations for Hashem from her students, all posted this year. The website and students gave her a 3.92 rating out of a possible 4.

Hashem also appears online in a May 2007 article by New Jersey Jewish News, about a May 13 celebration of Middle Eastern culture at Princeton University.

Referring to the mingling of Arab and Jewish students at the celebration, Hashem, then a special education aide at Princeton High School, told the Jewish News reporter: "We are similar cultures. We should get together. We eat halal. They eat kosher. What's the difference? We should work it out." 

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