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Trial Begins in Spokane Sex Discrimination Suit

Legal Voice Represents Woman Fired Over Pregnancy and Parenting

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Spokane, Wash. – September 7, 2010 – A federal court in Spokane today begins hearing testimony in a case brought by Norma Maxwell against VESi, a software company, for wrongful termination. Ms. Maxwell, who is represented by Janet S. Chung, attorney at Legal Voice, and Kammi Smith of Winston & Cashatt, was fired despite excellent performance reviews, after her employers told her she “had a negative attitude” about being pregnant and that they believed it was “not possible” for a mother to work from home if she had small children.

Norma Maxwell was a successful Senior Web Designer at VESi who had received positive evaluations, and had been permitted to work at home. However, when she became pregnant with her second child, she was admonished because she did not appear to be “glowing and happy,” which her employers alleged was how a woman should feel. After her child was born, Ms. Maxwell returned to work and asked to continue to work part-time at home and part-time in the office, as she had done previously. Her employers denied her request, because of their belief that no new mother could successfully work at home (in spite of her successfully doing so previously), and revoked her flexible work schedule. Soon after her maternity leave ended, she was fired.

Lisa M. Stone, Executive Director of Legal Voice, a woman’s rights organization based in Seattle, stated that “Ingrained and insidious gender stereotyping led to Ms. Maxwell’s firing. This employer’s outmoded ideas about what pregnant women can and should feel, and what working mothers can accomplish, violates Washington’s Law Against Discrimination.” That law, RCW 49.60, prohibits discrimination based on sex, including pregnancy discrimination.

The trial begins this afternoon before Judge Rosanna Peterson of the U.S. District Court for the eastern district of Washington. It is expected to last 3-4 days, and will include testimony from Ms. Maxwell and from representatives of the defendant corporation.

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Legal Voice is a nonprofit women's rights legal organization that pursues justice for all women and girls in the Northwest through ground-breaking litigation, legislative advocacy, and educational tools to help individuals understand their rights.