

✓ Educator fired over gay sex talk sues to get her job back

Civil suit filed against state DOE and conservative parents group

by Adrian Brune
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BOSTON — Margot Abels, the Department of Education HIV/AIDS instructor fired this year for answering frank questions posed by gay teens at a safe sex workshop, has sued to get her job back.

Abels filed a civil rights lawsuit against the two members of a conservative parents rights group responsible for illegally taping her and against DOE Commissioner David Driscoll, the man responsible for the loss of her job.

Abels seeks reinstatement in her job and back wages from the DOE. She is also seeking punitive damages from Brian Camenker and Scott Whiteman of the Parents Rights Coalition (PRC) for subjecting her to threats and abusive phone calls after they illegally taped the workshop she led and made it public by passing it on to the Massachusetts Legislature and a popular local radio talk-show host.

"The actions of Massachusetts conservative groups and of my former colleagues at the

Department of Education are unconscionable," Abels said in a written statement following the announcement of her lawsuit.

The lawsuit comes as no surprise to gay and lesbian activists and those closely watching the aftermath of the storm set off by Camenker and Whiteman's actions last March.

Abels was not the only DOE employee let go for conducting the "Queer Sex for Youth: Ages 14-21" workshop at the Tufts TeachOut conference sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which was conducted on a Saturday afternoon outside of a classroom and not affiliated with the DOE.

Another full-time HIV/AIDS awareness instructor was asked to resign and a third's contract was terminated after the controversy hit the papers last May. Neither one has filed their own lawsuits, nor have they signed on as co-plaintiffs in Abels'.

Abels continues to maintain that during her tenure at the

■ Abels ► on page 21

new england's gay and lesbian news and entertainment source

IN NEWSWEEKLY

Volume 10 Issue 16
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► Abels from page 1

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DOE, Driscoll and other members of the state organization fully supported her work and "shamefully caved in to the orchestrated pressure and heinous threats Ms. Abels received after the tape surfaced," said her attorney Betsy Ehrenberg.

The DOE sticks by its decision to fire Abels.

Calling the lawsuit an attempt to intimidate opponents of the "homosexual movement," PRC founder Camenker plans to contest the lawsuit.

"They want to make sure that nobody hears this tape and knows what they're doing, and they want to ruin financially and in any other way anyone who challenges them," Camenker told The Boston

Globe.

Camenker continues to refuse to comment to the gay press, citing bias and partiality.

Scott Whiteman, Camenker's undercover operative and the man who actually hit the "record" button at the conference, has since moved from Massachusetts, but is represented by Chester Darling, the notorious attorney responsible for the decision banning gay and lesbian Irish groups from participating in the Boston St. Patrick's Day parade.

"My client taped the commission of a crime and we're going to prove it in any court in the Commonwealth that we're dragged into," Darling said of the lawsuit.

Meanwhile, gay education groups are just beginning to recover

from the controversy that threatened to take away their funding and cost GLSEN its contract with the state. Despite the fact that GLSEN lost its funding as a result of the tape, the other groups are looking ahead to the second semester to bring their message of safety, tolerance and anti-violence to schools.

However, these groups uphold the ideals behind Abels' lawsuit.

"The safety of our GLBT youth and the providers that work with them are our highest priority," said Grace Sterling Stowell, executive director of the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY). "If any outside groups or individuals threaten or attempt to exploit that safety and privacy, we become quite concerned." ■