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I became a firefighter because I wanted to help people.

I wanted to work in the community I grew up in, Jamaica Plain, MA.

It was a respectable career, that would help me provide a better future for my daughter.

I wanted to be the exception to the statistics of a young single mother. I wanted better than my two minimum wage jobs and welfare could provide for us. I could not rely on child support or food stamps to survive.

I wanted to be one of Boston's Bravest! I wanted my daughter to be proud. I wanted to be the woman I never saw driving fire trucks through my neighborhood.

I worked hard. I took the written test. I prepared physically for the job. I passed all the requirements. I waited, and finally I received the hire card. The department was seeking to hire fluent Spanish speakers. It was a golden ticket for me because this was the first time that the fire department appeared to be recruiting individuals who spoke a second language other than English. Many people knew that if you were not a Vet, you would not make the list, but many local city kids did not know this and had a false sense of hope and the dream that they may someday join the fire department. Those kids did not know the truth, which was that the military has become the prerequisite to securing a position on the Boston Fire Department.

I felt blessed to have this opportunity. At the same time, when I arrived for my first tour I felt like a second-class citizen among my colleagues. I am not a veteran. I am not a man. I am a Latin woman. If there was a totem pole, I was at the very bottom. This means I had no room for mistakes. This means I would be subject to

hazing and mistreatment. It meant that if I did not do twice as much as others all the time, I would be labeled and criticized. My skin had to be twice as thick.

I felt that I had to tolerate anything that came my way, because I was lucky to be there. I was often reminded by some of my colleagues that I had taken a job from a man who could have provided for his family even though I was a single parent providing for mine. I was often treated as a second-class citizen. Some expected me to be the maid and submit to kitchen duties. As blessed as I felt, I refused to accept such stereotypes or tolerate that behavior towards me.

After several years and dozens of fires, I had established myself as a respected firefighter. I started to feel accepted. I started to feel somewhat part of the brotherhood. I loved my job. I loved rappelling from the buildings, I loved going to work in fires. I loved training for my career. My daughter was proud.

If I worked hard and really knew my job, I thought they would see that I belonged. After all, I was risking and making the same sacrifices that the men I worked with were making. I too missed my daughter's recitals, and holidays with family. I too took the same oath to serve and protect life and property. I even trained on my own time. I knew my job. When the time came to go into a burning building, I was right there, shoulder to shoulder, with the guys from my house.

I deserved to earn the respect of my fellow firefighters based on my service, however not everyone respected me. Some tested the boundaries. Enough of them thought I did not belong to influence the larger crowd. When I did bring an incident to a superior's attention and proper consequences were not issued, incidents began to escalate. I was then shamed and labeled a troublemaker.

The situation went from bad to worse. In January 2018, I was sexually assaulted in the fire house by a fellow firefighter and it was well known that criminal charges were brought against him. The guys that I once relied on for my life and safety now turned against me. I felt as though everyone was my enemy. Even while on leave I would attend funerals of fallen firefighters while my colleagues ignored me there. They stayed together, and I was now an outsider. I felt that I was shunned because there was a criminal prosecution of the firefighter that I accused of sexual assaulting me.

There were many who seemed afraid of being seen speaking to me out of fear of being backlisted. I was humiliated and heard that I was gossiped about by 5 command staff and local politicians. Management made me feel that they didn't believe me. They isolated me, shunned me, accused, and appeared to blame me for becoming a victim. Many of my brother firefighters showed up on the first day of the criminal trial in their Boston Fire Fighter uniforms to support the defendant who was accused of sexually assaulting me. A jury convicted him of the felony of Indecent Assault & Battery and of the second charge of Assault & Battery. The sentence imposed by the judge was probation, but also that he register as a sex offender if required by law. Many of the firefighters from my fire house also appeared in the court room at the sentencing, and then accompanied him to the Probation Department. "You made him lose his job!" some said. "No, he made himself lose his job !" I replied.

For almost one year after the conviction, the City failed to support and accommodate me in my hoped-for plan to continue my career in the fire department. I felt they were making an example of me to other women in the department who might ever think of speaking out about being mistreated.

Rather than dealing with issues that are priorities for female firefighters, the priority for management became getting separate bunks, locks on women's bathrooms, proper fitting equipment for women, and uniforms that fit properly. All important, but none of them deal with the way women are actually treated. The Boston Fire Department claims with pride to be first fire department established in the nation, but it is last in respecting women.

Management seems to be conditioning women to accept as normal the mistreatment they are receiving. In my case, after I reported the assault, I did not feel that I received any support from the Department.

Let me be clear: I agreed to leave the department not because of fear, but out of self-respect. I felt forced to surrender my career as a firefighter, because I did not feel that I would be safe from some of my brother fire fighters if I returned. I'm breaking my silence, because I believe that women firefighters deserve equal treatment in the Boston Fire Department. However, at this point that is the dream, but not the reality, for many women firefighters. The Department is

overdue for change, and the time for change is now. I hope that my drawing attention to some of the challenges I faced will help to bring that change.

Statement of Nathalie Fontanez

Represented by Gloria Allred, Michael Maroko, and Boston co-counsel Jonathan Margolis and Beth Myers.

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