

Self-Described Union Basher is “Born Again” Through Arbitration Journey

February 2, 2016

Genesee County paraeducator Sharon Campbell can't help but see the irony.

For 16 years, she worked with cognitively impaired young adults, teaching them what they would need to know to successfully navigate in the world: independent living skills, such as personal grooming, cooking, and house-keeping. Plus the social skills to land a job and keep it.

“There was never a day I didn't look forward to seeing my students,” she said.

“My students were my heart. They were like my kids. I loved them like I did my own.”

Then she was fired, and the woman whose job was to teach others how to live found her own world spinning out of control.

“It's ironic, isn't it? I'm getting all emotional now, just talking about it,” she said. “It was absolutely devastating to me. I still haven't processed it all.”

The part of her story she still couldn't process days later – what felt like a dream – was the moment she learned her deepest wish had come true. In mid-January, more than a year after her dismissal, an arbitrator ruled in Campbell's favor in a grievance filed against the Genesee County Intermediate School District.

And there's a deeper irony, too: Campbell would have missed out on the help she needed to win if she hadn't reconsidered dropping her MEA membership.

As a member, the help that saved her job came in the form of an MEA staff attorney and arbitration specialist, who steered the 50-year-old single mother of two sons through the labyrinth of evidence gathering and hearings. As a result, Campbell was granted back pay, full credit for her years of service, retroactive health expenses, and a return to her job with the district. Most of all, she won vindication.



“I was like, ‘Heck yeah, where do I sign up to not pay dues?’ I was the biggest naysayer. ... I was a union basher. But now I'm born again. Now I'm the biggest rah-rah union advocate there is.”

Now she's convinced of the value of union membership. "Being able to lean on the union for support, it gave me a voice," she said.

However, she didn't always think that way.

Three years ago, after the Michigan Legislature passed the so-called "Right to Work" law that allowed employees to receive the benefits of a union without having to pay their fair share of the costs of representation, Campbell rushed to drop out of paying dues. She rationalized her decision as a single mom living paycheck to paycheck with no child support.

"I was like, 'Heck yeah, where do I sign up to not pay dues?' I was the biggest naysayer. I'm being honest – I'm always honest. I was a union basher. But now I'm born again. Now I'm the biggest rah-rah union advocate there is."

Fortunately for her, Campbell reinstated her dues four months before she was fired, when she started to feel unsupported by her district's administration. As a result, "The MEA was with me every step of the way," she said. "Without the union, I never would have been able to prove what happened to me."

According to the arbitrator's ruling, Campbell's actions on Dec. 2, 2014 – which resulted in her dismissal – were never in dispute. What the two sides disagreed about in arbitration were the disciplinary charges she faced as a result of what happened.

On that day, Campbell and another paraeducator were taking three young adult special education students on a field trip to Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth. Twice while driving, Campbell handed an iPad off or reached for it with a student in the back seat. Each time, she glanced at the iPad and touched an icon to activate the camera or switch the camera view from inward to outward orientation.

Once the group returned to school, Campbell's colleague reported her for violating the district's policy against use of an electronic device while driving a district-owned vehicle. He said he feared being labeled complicit if information came out later and he hadn't reported it.

Under questioning at the time, Campbell admitted what she did and acknowledged it was wrong. "I never tried to hide it. I said all along it was a bad decision, and I shouldn't have done that."

Initially given a three-day paid leave, Campbell returned for a meeting and learned of her dismissal Dec. 8. One of the hardest aspects of her firing was having to disappear without explanation from her students' lives. "I didn't get to say goodbye," she said.

Campbell filed her grievance several weeks later, in January 2015, the start of a long road back.

Unable to pay her bills, she faced the loss of her Swartz Creek home. She tapped into retirement funds, paying huge penalties, to keep food on the table. Stress-related health problems mounted.

Eventually she couldn't get out of bed, and a counselor diagnosed her with depression and anxiety. That was her rock bottom, she said, but she's getting better.

The arbitrator's ruling was issued Jan. 15, nearly one year to the day after Campbell filed her grievance arguing the discipline she received was out of proportion to the offense committed. "Yeah, I did a wrong thing, and I should have had a consequence for it, but dismissal? No."

The arbitrator concurred. Some of the grounds for Campbell's termination were dismissed as "false and/or unsubstantiated" in the ruling. In addition, the district's decision to fire Campbell ignored "her long service and lack of previous discipline."

"Being believed... It's everything to me," she said. "I'm glad to be able to hold my head up high."

The ruling means Campbell will receive reimbursement for medical expenses and back pay, minus a five-day unpaid suspension, which the arbitrator ruled a just punishment in this case.

Campbell had a nearly perfect discipline record in 16 years at the district, so she never thought anything like this could happen to her. "I couldn't have done it without the union there with me, no way, shape, or form," she said.

"I hope this inspires other people to stay informed, stay engaged, and stay involved in their union."

Now she's back at work. She returned to a different position, at a different school, at the end of January. Although it's hard to adjust to new people, "Seeing students again was amazing," she said. "My heart is full of joy."