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LOCAL news

TALK ABOUT JUNK MAIL

Transsexual activist Ashley Sinclair claims the Corvallis Mail Center violated her civil rights by Inga Sorensen

State investigators are looking into whether transsexual activist Ashley Sinclair's civil rights were violated by an employee at the Corvallis Mail Center.

The Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries probe is in response to a complaint filed by Sinclair in which she alleges that the Corvallis Mail Center violated her civil rights and a local ordinance prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations based on sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation.

Sinclair, 28, says she intermittently rented private mailboxes from the center during a five-year period.

Last spring, Sinclair legally changed her name (from Benjamin John Campbell) and started hormone therapy as part of her gender reassignment process.

At that time she was collaborating with Washington prisoner Donald Snook on projects related to prison activism.

She says they had a "romantic relationship," and that Snook knew of her transsexual status and was supportive.

According to Sinclair, that summer Snook received a handwritten letter that read: "Don—Ashley let me read your letter. I hope you know she is a he. His real name is Ben Campbell. He is a fag. You are getting love letters from a man who wants to be a woman. Think about it. He wants to move to San Francisco. This place is known as gay bay. I lived two hours south of this hell hole. Ha, ha, ha, ha. You stupid ass. You want pussy so bad you will let a fag turn you on."

Snook forwarded the letter to Sinclair, who was stunned. Equally disturbing to her, however, was the fear that someone was stealing and reading her mail. Sinclair says she never let anyone read her correspondence with Snook.

"It felt like a total invasion," she says. "It's still hard for me to tell this story because it's embarrassing and traumatic."

Sinclair says she reported the matter to Corvallis police, who initially "neglected to take a written report" because, they said, no crime had been committed.

Sinclair surmised that Jennifer Kroesing, an employee of the Corvallis Mail Center—and daughter of the facility's owner, Kelly Brown—had written the letter to Snook. Samples she obtained of Kroesing's handwriting "exactly matched the handwriting in the homophobic letter," Sinclair says.

She went back to the Corvallis police with the information, and they eventually questioned Kroesing and Brown.

According to the police report, Kroesing initially "denied any knowledge of the letter written to Snook." She later admitted to authoring the letter but denied stealing or opening mail.

Sinclair says Kroesing claimed that "she'd somehow figured out that I was 'pretending' to

be a woman, even though she did not know me at all. She said she just wanted to warn [Snook] out of the goodness of her heart about how I was supposedly 'pretending.'"

Kroesing, who is still employed by the Corvallis Mail Center, would not comment for this story.

Brown, however, tells *Just Out* that her daughter did write the letter but did not tamper with anyone's mail.

"[Kroesing] swears she did not open a letter," says Brown.

As for Kroesing's missive to Snook, Brown says, "This is an isolated incident. It happened only once. One time. One letter."

Brown adds that Kroesing can sometimes be "a little misguided" but promises a similar situation will not arise in the future.

"We don't discriminate against anyone here," she says, "I mean, I'd say half our clients are gay."

No criminal charges have been brought due to "insufficient evidence to show a crime had



Ashley Sinclair

been committed," concludes the police report.

Sinclair, meanwhile, talked with Corvallis ombudsperson Prudence Miles, who advised her that even with no proof of mail theft, Kroesing and the Corvallis Mail Center may have violated the city's anti-discrimination law, enabling her to file a discrimination claim with BOLI.

Miles tells *Just Out* that Sinclair appears to have received "differential treatment" due to her perceived sexual orientation.

The BOLI investigation is expected to last several weeks.

Reflecting upon the scenario, Sinclair, who has since moved to Portland, says, "I've had so many emotions around this. It was really hard at first, but I feel more empowered now because I'm trying to do something about it."

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER