

Portland School District caused hardship for fired custodians

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Five years, one month and 15 days after her last work day, Elaine Smith got her last paycheck.

Smith, 55, is one of about 320 union custodians who were fired by Portland Public Schools in 2002 when the School Board decided to out-source its custodial department. Thanks to the out-of-court settlement to a class-action lawsuit, on Sept. 15 she found two checks totaling \$25,945.90 in her Southeast Portland mailbox.

But the windfall came years after the hardship it was meant to compensate. Her husband Ken, a former union boilermaker, drives a garbage truck for the Housing Authority of Portland as a member of Teamsters Local 305. After her termination, they totally exhausted their savings. They sold an RV, took out a second mortgage, and even thought about cashing in a life insurance policy. Last month she took early retirement. Her first monthly PERS check, for \$2,200, will arrive later this year.

"So many of our people suffered a lot worse than I did," Smith said. Some co-workers lost their homes.

But Smith's story — one of more than 300 — is not untypical.

Smith says she grew up poor but



ELAINE SMITH

happy in St. Johns as the daughter of a PPS custodian. Her father worked at Roosevelt High School (where she graduated in 1970) and earned enough to keep the family just above the poverty line. In her 20s, though she made good money as a union-represented waitress, Smith found she had to pay \$30 a month for individual health coverage through Kaiser. So she went to work as a School District custodian in 1979, because the district paid the health insurance for its employees. Her brother later joined her as a PPS custodian. Her father retired in 1981.

"When I started, the district was very family-oriented," Smith said. "Now they're running it like a corpo-

ration."

The district had 900 custodians — all members of School Employees Local 140, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union — when she began. By the time she was terminated, it had just over 300 and Local 140 later disbanded.

"The superintendents that make these decisions come and go like CEOs," Smith said, "and people like us, that have history with the district, have to live with their decisions."

Smith had worked 23 years when PPS got rid of its in-house custodians, replacing them with private janitors who earned two-thirds the wages and less than half the benefits.

"When they fired us, I lost a family," Smith said. "The teachers and the students were part of that family."

Smith had worked at Southeast Portland's Lane Middle School her last three years at the district. She worked hard to keep in touch with her fellow custodians. Her brother, who also lost his job as a district custodian, found work at the Housing Authority of Portland.

After an Oregon Supreme Court decision forced the district to offer recall to the custodians, Smith was one of the majority who chose not to go back.

"People don't trust the district any more," Smith explained.

Smith's instincts proved true. The custodians returned under what Smith calls an "illegal contract" — a set of terms that no custodian had voted to approve. And a year later, their union, Service Employees Local 503, re-

ceived the district's new contract offer — a roughly 30 percent cut in wages, and a requirement that they start to pay out of pocket for a portion of their health insurance premiums.

Smith said she's outraged for her former co-workers, but glad she's not among them. Her blood pressure went down greatly after she left the district, and now she has time to care for her dogs, raise and sell flowers, and spend more time with her husband. "Still," she said, "I miss the kids."

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