

After All is Said and Done

Caroline Frengle on FOOD, firing, friends and foes.

Imagine you love your job, but there's suspicion about inappropriate charges to your expense account. The suspicions and an itemized account history get out to the local paper and next thing you know, you're reading all about it in the news.

There's an investigation, even a formal audit — you are found innocent. Still, your boss says, "The damage to the company's reputation is done," and you get canned. Sucks, huh? Welcome to life the last couple of months for former FOOD for Lane County Director Caroline Frengle.

This past April, former FFLC Development Director Joachim Schulz circulated a memo outlining concerns for FFLC's fiscal policy and direction. July 19, *The Register-Guard* reported that the FFLC board was calling for a special audit of agency credit cards, zeroing in on Frengle's spending. July 25, *The R-G* reported that FFLC had released the credit tab itemizing Frengle's purchases — a release made before the special audit was complete. On Aug. 16, *The R-G* reported both that the special audit had cleared Frengle of any wrongdoing and that she had been "discharged," which is fancy for "canned." In five quick months, Frengle's career had unraveled.

During our interview, I am struck first by the clear sense of grief still upon her, a week since her dismissal. She speaks carefully; her eyes get a little shiny through parts of our discussion. Her foremost concern is the reputation of FOOD for Lane County and "the good, good people" who make up its staff. Though she firmly believes that someone, maybe several someones, had it in for her, she refrains, for the most part, from mentioning people by name. She chooses, even in expulsion, not to point fingers directly, not to speculate specifically on why her career has come undone after nearly 20 years. Here, after all has been said and done, she sits down with *EW* to talk about the aftermath.

EW: *The events preceding your firing came to light in the context of inappropriate use of funds. How did it feel to be at the center of these events and this context as it unfolded in the public arena?*

CF: Well, I think it's two different things. First, the allegations and how to deal with them in a way that gives me an opportunity to set the record straight. I chose not to be public in terms of that, thinking I was protecting the agency, because not only was it an attack against me, but it was damaging to the agency — my first concern is the agency.

There was just no truth in what was being said. I didn't want to get in a pissing contest or a she-said he-said kind of thing, because that isn't helpful. I chose — and was asked by the board, as were all the other board members — not to discuss these things in public. But the people who were leaking, or rather giving, information to the press didn't feel so obligated.

If you say things enough times, plant seeds of doubt, tarnish my image and reputation in the community, then it doesn't matter what the truth is. Even board members who were good people decided to fire me — or ask me to resign — in the end, because the argument

from more vocal board members was, "Now her public perception is ruined, and that's the perception of the agency." This was all leaked by a particular faction on the board, the damage was done, and then they said, "See now, we can't keep her." None of this needed to happen. None of those things were issues that were worthy of front page news.

Then there was the personal part and how to deal with this in terms of my "public image." I've never been into image — (*laughs*) luckily. If I had been, I would have been destroyed. Primarily I'm a person whose path is more important than where I'm getting to.

When these really serious, vicious allegations came out, I felt like I was walking around the community completely naked. And actually, it was like, "Well, I am [figuratively naked], and here I am." Whatever's left after you strip the clothes off, that's who I am. When I realized that, it was like, "So what?" I still am who I am. While it might be sort of embarrassing, it doesn't matter. The people who know me and love me, still know me and love me. And I know and love myself.

EW: *In the R-G coverage, your comments seemed measured, even careful. Did you feel free to give your side of the story, or did it seem that would only feed the fire?*

CF: I felt it would feed the fire. People said to me, "You should just kick up a fury, because they're after your hide, and they're not going to stop until they get it." I did what I could do to convince the board they were going down the wrong track. I spent a lot of time answering each one of the board members, trying to inject reason into the process. But minds were made up months ago, and most of what happened was to achieve an end.

There was *nothing* in the audit — that came clear. The big hype was waiting for the audit results and all of this mismanagement, and there was nothing there. It was a very calculated, manipulative plan to get rid of me and make sure that FFLC was primarily involved in emergency food distribution, and that's all. [Balancing emergency food distribution with nutrition education and awareness has been a major point of contention at FFLC.]

EW: *Why do you think you were targeted and dismissed this way? Do you think it was work politics? Were there more personal issues at play? Was it some combination of both?*

CF: It was a combination. There was a faction of the board kind of behind what happened. As a strategy, several [incidents], not large ones, were lumped together, painting a picture to the rest of the board that was very purposeful — implying I had lied and had not been forthcoming. Then it looked like, "This is huge!"

A responsible board would have, in my opinion, brought [the infractions] forward one at a time. In fact, I had pointed out several things that needed attention, and then it was turned around so that it was like, I'm out of control.

As for FFLC running at a deficit, and this huge debt load we carry — it's more than we want, for sure. But we had a mortgage of \$500,000 on the warehouse when we finished — we didn't get enough in the capital campaign to complete it. We've taken on \$250,000 since. We had some difficult years and weren't alone in the nonprofit world, which is not to excuse that. But they were difficult years — we distributed almost three

was the continuity for the agency, as well.

A faction wanted me out well before any of this came up and, in fact, engineered the allegations and the leak [of information]. The group wasn't large enough to get rid of me when it first started. I don't know at what point it turned over. I had trusted that it wasn't a done deal and that they really did want policy revisions and internal controls, that it wasn't necessarily me they wanted gone. I was wrong.

EW: *Was there tension between you and the board, or between you and any co-workers that might have precipitated the events of the last few months?*

CF: Well, certainly after Joachim Schulz wrote the memo, there was tension between him and the staff. And there had been tension simply because he wasn't doing his job.

Also, about a year ago, there was a board member, with the help of the chair, who was consistently abusive toward me and discredited me in front of the rest of the board. At that point, if the board had stepped in and said, "No, this is not the way we act at FFLC, under any conditions" ... if they had been firm in their respect for people, like the agency is, this would not have happened.

EW: *Has this situation created increased self-consciousness or defensiveness for you in your everyday life?*

CF: No, it's been the other way around. I make sure I go to all the places I've always gone to. I have not "hidden out." The last couple of months have been so surreal in so many ways, because it's just *so stupid*.

In terms of my feelings, they're very deep, and I do have my public self, but there's not much difference [between the private and public]. I'll be in the grocery store, and someone comes up to hug me — which has happened a whole lot — and I just immediately get tears in my eyes because of the goodness coming toward me. The goodness has been almost as intense as the bad stuff.

EW: *How does it feel to have worked so hard for so long at a job you clearly loved, and to have it end in such disaster?*

CF: I don't think this will settle here, because it's wrong. I have belief in the universe that things don't work that way. I didn't get to stay — and in personal ways, maybe that's just a kick in the butt, and I need to be doing something else. I'm going to be patient and wait to see what the next thing is. But no matter what I do, this shouldn't end, *can't* end like this — it's not the way of things for it to end on a stingy, nasty, malicious note.

EW: *Final thoughts?*

CF: The community has *been* the food bank. That's a value we've had, but it's also a reality. You can't have a place like FFLC doing that much without the buy-in of the community. There are thousands of volunteers down there, and thousands of people who provide resources. And we never ask for just resources — we ask for commitment to the cause. People are part of the solution. They've been participating for the whole 20 years — some of them have been there since the beginning — and they may need to step up and say, "Listen, this is our food bank. It's been damaged and we need to heal. We need to reclaim it."



times as much food for the same amount of money. And it's just an impossible thing to do. We were in the process of coming to terms with that.

But that was a big opening in terms of my management, like — "OK, she's not doing it." This year, without the audit adjustment made, we're in the black about \$59,000. So, we don't have a deficit. On a cash basis, we're ahead (*pauses and catches herself*) — they're ahead.

There's a huge feeling on the board, and only this board, that I've never run up against, having always worked in partnership before. One of the mantras of this whole deal has been, "You work for us. We don't work for you." There's some real ego involved here.

EW: *An R-G editorial (8/16) noted that FFLC has outgrown you, implying that with FFLC being your "baby," perhaps you couldn't handle the letting go of control that happens with an organization's growth. Thoughts on this theory?*

CF: If that was the case, why throw the baby out with the bath water? Why damage the agency? If, in fact, they just wanted to take a look at leadership — certainly we needed some policy revision, some internal controls, there's no question about that — then I would have worked with them. I suggested doing that — to come up with a two- or three-year plan to make sure that everything was on target and to find someone to replace me.

EW: *The same editorial mentions FFLC's board has "adopted a new set of policies defining limitations on executive practices ... [that] should prevent the types of problems that proved to be Frengle's undoing." Was there any sense of collaboration between you and the board on adopting such policies together that might have avoided this situation, or at least allowed you to work it out internally?*

CF: I thought we were in a process of taking care of internal controls and policy revisions. I mean, it's true — I was there for 20 years. I did have a sense of entitlement as a natural outcome of having been the founder and person in charge. Boards come and go, and while they're the boss — and I totally respect and understand that — they are not long-term. They turn over. And so, in fact, I