



REPORTER FIRED FOR CHECKING EMAIL?

Serena Markstrom Nugent's termination from the R-G draws employee protest

Almost 13 years after starting at Eugene's local daily paper, *The Register-Guard*, reporter Serena Markstrom Nugent was fired while on pregnancy disability leave from the paper where she had worked since college. Another employee cleaned out Markstrom Nugent's desk for her, and she was told she could pick up her belongings in the reception area. "It felt like getting punched in the stomach," Markstrom Nugent says. About 30 current and former employees and supporters gathered to say goodbye in the rain on the sidewalk outside the R-G's offices on Chad Drive March 27 with signs of support and balloons.

According to Randi Bjornstad, an R-G employee and co-president of the union, the Eugene Newspaper Guild, "The unofficial reason the guild was given for her termination was that she had checked her email while on leave and had deleted one or more emails which the company considered destruction of company property."

Markstrom Nugent had been the paper's entertainment reporter for almost a decade, writing mainly about popular and up-and-coming local and national musical acts. Jazz musician Paul Biondi, who attended the gathering, said that Markstrom Nugent will be missed because she was "so well versed in the music and the arts" in the community, and called the R-G's decision to terminate her employment "irresponsible."

EW met up with Markstrom Nugent at her doctor's office where she was fitting in an ultrasound and other medical appointments before losing her insurance due to her termination. She says her baby boy is healthy, and she will have access to medical care.

Markstrom Nugent, whose degree is in magazine writing, says she was switched from her entertainment and features beat to a government and rural communities beat in 2012. Such switches, as well as downsizing of newspaper newsrooms, have become more common in recent years as print newspapers deal with a changing world of internet publishing and social media. Moving

writers to beats they are unfamiliar with is often seen as a strategy to get rid of experienced, higher-paid writers and replace them with newer reporters at a lower pay scale.

Markstrom Nugent says she was on the hard news beat for about nine months, taking time off to get married in August. In late October she began experiencing symptoms of pregnancy — nausea, headaches, fatigue — and soon told her editor she was pregnant and filed her Family and Medical Leave Act paperwork so she could take intermittent leave when needed. About three weeks after she announced her pregnancy, Markstrom Nugent says she was told by her editor, Ilene Aleshire, that she needed coaching on her writing.

She says that coaching meeting turned into 90 minutes of criticism, followed by a summary review of Markstrom Nugent's "deficiencies" that she says contained inaccuracies.

"This was the first time I had heard anything wrong about my performance," she says, adding, "They had nine months to bring up these issues if there was a problem, long enough to make a baby, but they didn't bring this stuff up until I was pregnant."

On Dec. 10, Markstrom Nugent says she was called into a meeting with Aleshire and Managing Editor Dave Baker (the Baker family owns the R-G) and given a "performance improvement plan." According to the Newspaper Guild of New York, Reuters news agency also attempted to use PIPs to get rid of older, more experienced journalists. In 2012 an arbitrator ruled Reuters violated a contract in using a PIP as a disciplinary tool. In 2013 the guild reports Reuters offered jobs back to eight of the journalists who were fired under PIPs.

Markstrom Nugent refused to sign the PIP and contacted her union, which was unaware of any alleged problems with her performance. The union began to meet with her editor and with human resources to rewrite the PIP, which Markstrom Nugent signed on Jan. 8. "I did my best to comply," she says. "I worked really hard at it." On Feb. 5, her doctor put her on pregnancy disability.

Wendy Baker was named director of human resources and general counsel for the R-G in the summer of 2013. She is the wife of editor and publisher Tony Baker and her prior private law practice focused "on management-side labor and employment advice and defense," according to the R-G's *Blue Chip* publication. Wendy Baker tells EW, "Of course we have no comment; this is a personnel issue."

Markstrom Nugent says while she was on leave, the union and human resources tried to negotiate a settlement. On March 10 and 18, she says, she checked her email from home, forwarded some, including one related to a scholarship committee she served on, and deleted others. She was then asked to come in and explain why she had checked email. She says she was told to come in or Wendy Baker would begin preparing her final paycheck. "It was lose my job or take a really crappy [buyout] deal," she says. "I couldn't take the deal; it was really insulting."

Bjornstad says, "To my knowledge no one has ever been disciplined before for using their company email accounts during leaves of absence." She continues, "We did our best to come up with an equitable solution, short of termination" and says the union intends to pursue the issue.

Instead of an office baby shower and a return to a job she loved, Markstrom Nugent said an emotional goodbye to her former co-workers on the rainy sidewalk in front of the R-G. "I didn't deserve how they treated me," she says of R-G management.

At the same time, in social media posts, she has asked her friends and online followers to not stop their subscriptions to the paper, writing, "The bulk of the people who provide the content of the paper had nothing to do with management's recent shenanigans in my situation. Cutting your subscriptions could hurt people who only do the right thing and work hard under brutal conditions, and often counterproductive micromanaging, to bring you a solid product."

She tells EW, "I didn't want all this to happen." ■

Full disclosure: R-G and EW reporters hang out sometimes and are even friends.



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