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From the Los Angeles Times

Bears, bullies and victimizers beware this feisty lawyer

Genie Harrison takes on discrimination, sexual harassment and civil rights -- and does it all with a smirk.
Sandy Banks

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She's been bombarded with hate mail addressed to "Dog Food Lawyer." She's been pilloried on talk radio as a money-grubbing bottom feeder. She settled the most notorious case of her career for the blue chip equivalent of pocket change.

But this week, Genie Harrison was feeling vindicated.

The city of Los Angeles fought her discrimination claim on behalf of black firefighter Tennie Pierce in a highly charged case. But the United States had just landed quietly, yet powerfully, on her side in a separate case.

On Monday, in the case of a female firefighter Harrison represents, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission declared that the Los Angeles Fire Department violated the civil rights of black and female firefighters by allowing them to be harassed and discriminated against on the job.

Now, the department must reform. No more plans that never get implemented. No more good intentions. "This department needs to answer to somebody with a really big hammer," Harrison said Wednesday, unable to stifle a smile. "Call me crazy, but that just might be the federal government."

I first met Harrison a year ago, when I wrote about the \$2.7-million settlement she negotiated for Pierce, who sued the city after being fed dog food in a firehouse prank.

At that time, Harrison struck me as prim, subdued and straight-laced; hardly the firebrand civil rights type.

But she showed her strategic, street-fighter side a few weeks later, when she packed the City Council chambers with Pierce's entourage of friends, family and community activists. Then she stood arm-in-arm with her client, a hulking man twice her size, while he tearfully pleaded with City Council members not to accede to public pressure and reduce his settlement.

The gambit failed. The council upheld a mayoral veto of the award. But Harrison left an impression: She would not back down.

"You had all these guys who'd been making a mockery out of everything" she stood for, recalled Councilman Herb Wesson. "Watching her reminded me of something [former mayor] Tom Bradley used to say: If you ever see her in a fight with a bear, help the bear."

That was my impression too. So I asked Harrison out for lunch this week to find out what's behind that steely smile, those bright blue eyes, the "Texas Tornado" nickname that her law firm partners gave her.

I learned that she was raised in a small town in East Texas, where her neighbors used the n-word freely and it was considered a compliment to tell a woman she was *almost* as good as a man.

She was a tomboy, and off-the-charts smart. At age 8, she was sent out with a .22-caliber rifle to bag squirrels for her family's dinner. At 15, she graduated from high school, two years ahead of her class. She's 39 now and has spent 16 years practicing employment law.

She reeled off her bio, and I dutifully took it down. But nowhere in my notebook could I find the answer to what a reader in my chair might want to know:

How does a quick-witted cowgirl -- who learned to be polite from her mother and self-sufficient from her dad -- wind up in these ugly public battles, on the side of perceived misfits and whiners?

Of course, if I asked her the question that way, I'd have to duck to save my life.

So I pushed her later, on the phone, to figure out where her passion comes from.

It turns out, she knows what it's like to be harassed, to feel helpless, afraid to rock the boat, uncertain if you'll be believed.

At 16, already a college student in the mid-1980s, she was groped by the 65-year-old professor her mother had asked to look out for her. "I was totally freaked out," she recalled. "I thought, 'This is really weird, but what do I do?'"

She didn't tell anyone that time. Or the time when she was just 17, working at a law firm, and her boss asked her to stay late for a drink. Or the time

another boss "blew me a kiss and put his hand on my rear."

It wasn't until she took a class in law school on sexual harassment that she realized "what's happening to me is happening to other people. And there's something that can be done about it."

Harrison is not just the dog food lawyer. She's represented white men who were retaliated against for speaking out against hazing of female firefighters. She's represented women firefighters who were assaulted and humiliated by their bosses.

"From the first time I met her, she was able to put into words what I was feeling," said Capt. Alicia Mathis, among the department's highest ranking females. Mathis has taken steps toward filing a class action discrimination lawsuit. "After 15 years . . . finally, somebody understood. It was like I had a voice all of a sudden."

Pierce's case fell into Harrison's lap after he had been turned down by a dozen other lawyers.

And though its settlement amount -- Pierce nets about \$1 million -- is paltry compared with some court cases she's won, Harrison says she's not disappointed. But I suspect, from the way she delivers what sounds like a rehearsed response, that Harrison wanted to take this case to a jury.

"Tennie made a decision to do what's right for his family, so they can go on with their lives," she said. "I respect that."

She'll wind up with about \$300,000 for a case that all but consumed her for two years. The outside lawyers the city hired 10 months ago to take her on are asking the city for more than \$1 million.

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