

Justice Served

by Niki Gililand

My legal battle against my former college started over four years ago, four very long years ago. It started after my teacher, advisor, and mentor discovered I had been a sex worker a decade prior. She told me “Unclassy women shouldn’t be nurses.” Her name was Melissa, and she had turned on me so quickly that I am still dizzy from it to this day. Melissa drove me out of nursing school by giving me fake assignments, trying to have me expelled, changing my grades, and completely ostracizing me from my other classmates and teachers. Not only did nobody stop her, but her superiors *helped* her. I filed complaints with every possible authority, nobody cared. The only recourse left was civil action, so I filed my lawsuit. I sued for sex discrimination under Title IX, as well as breach of the school’s own anti-discrimination contract.

The day of the verdict, I had spent the day preparing myself for bad news. A jury question had been posed that sounded like we were about to lose, “If we decide no on the Title IX, do we still consider the breach of contract claim?” Upon hearing this, my heart sank. It had been an intense and exhausting trial that had filled nearly two weeks. Four years of struggling for justice hinged on this final moment. Although it now appeared that it was not going to end well, I started to pick myself back. It had been an incredible trial. Although difficult, I could not think of anything that could have gone better. I had a legal dream-team, an incredible judge, attentive jury, strong evidence, and the Defendants had even managed to suck- *perfectly*. We had given it our absolute best shot and the peace to be found was in that, not the outcome.

After an excruciating long day of waiting, we were finally called back for the verdict. The long deliberation was a good sign, according to my legal team, “It’s easy to say no. Yes takes longer.” Juror Seven is announced as the foreperson, another good sign, as she had made the most eye contact with me over the course of the trial. Judge Kasubhai begins to read the verdict in his almost god-like, perfect for radio-hosting voice; no on the claim of Title IX. On breach of contract; yes. Full economic damages of \$735,000, non-economic damages of \$1,000,000. This was the first time anyone with the power to do anything about it had said what happened to me at school was not okay, and this jury had just done it in a big way. I started

silently crying so hard that my mask started filling with the tears. I had fought so hard and for so long to obtain *any* form of justice I could get, and I had just been given it. I felt the weight of the burden I had been carrying lift. I felt so much lighter.

This had never been about money. This has been about accountability, justice, and validation. What I need to heal from now is the fact that it took a lawsuit and trial to get anything done. So many people with the power to stop and correct what had been done had chosen to do nothing. I fought back because if one vindictive and insignificant bigot could snap her fingers and just take away my many years of hard work, anyone could, and no future would be safe. I fought back, and I won. I would not wish this on anyone, yet this discrimination happens all the time. The next person who is tempted will think twice before meddling in my life. Institutions around the country will think twice before bringing harm to someone based on sex work or slut-shaming. Most importantly, let this victory be the empowerment you need to fight back if it happens to you.

About the Author

Niki is former sex worker and is currently a full-time law student at University of Massachusetts. She plans on specializing in sex worker civil rights after graduation. After nearly a decade in emergency medicine, Niki was run out of nursing school when her professors found out about her past sex work. She sued for discrimination under Title IX and succeeded in getting a federal court to reason that the law could be used in this way. Niki now serves on the Board of SWOP Behind Bars and is an Ambassador to Woodhull Freedom Foundation.