

In My Own Words

DEGROEN ET AL V. CITY OF BELLEVUE ET AL

Larry deGroen, a 45-year-old veteran firefighter and paramedic, has worked for the city of Bellevue, Washington for 12 years. His sexual orientation was never much of an issue, until two years ago, when he made a simple request of his employer — that the city give him a paid day off to attend the funeral of his partner's father in Michigan. The city's refusal to offer something it regularly gives its heterosexual married employees led him to Lambda Legal. Here's Larry's own story of why he chose to file a lawsuit against his employer.

All I wanted to do was be the best at my job while also supporting my family.

I've been a firefighter and paramedic for the city of Bellevue, Washington, since 1995. I've always enjoyed my work and have taken great satisfaction in helping people in their time of need. When I was hired, the fact that Bellevue did not grant domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples didn't really bother me because my partner, Tom, had benefits from his own job. I thought that, in time, things would change and Bellevue would join Seattle, King County and other municipalities in offering us those benefits. I was willing to wait and not make a fuss.

"I felt hurt and betrayed after all of my years of loyal service."

All of that changed when Tom's father passed away in December of 2005. The city denied my request for a single day of paid bereavement leave to attend the funeral in Detroit — because Tom was not considered part of my family. On top of that, the city made me work overtime without pay in compensation for being at Tom's side. I felt hurt and betrayed after all of my years of

loyal service. I was no longer willing to wait patiently for the same benefits my heterosexual colleagues already got for their spouses.

So I decided to take action. I met with chiefs and deputy chiefs of the fire department, as well as the mayor, city manager and several city council members, in an attempt to push them toward granting domestic partner benefits. Despite a lot of encouraging talk, over a year passed with absolutely no progress. Finally, in frustration, I contacted Lambda Legal. Filing a lawsuit was the last thing I wanted to do, but I was becoming convinced it was the only way to get the council's attention.

Two other potential plaintiffs joined me: firefighter and paramedic Faun Patzer, and lead 911 dispatcher George Einsetler. Like me, both were longtime city employees. Both had also asked city officials for the same benefits they gave our heterosexual co-workers. After some careful strategic planning between the three of us, along with the union representing Faun and me, Lambda Legal staff attorney Tara Borelli filed suit in April 2007. Tara, Faun and I spoke at a press conference at the entrance of Bellevue City Hall in front of crews from



Larry deGroen

three television stations, at least two radio stations, the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Maybe it was the glare from the camera lights, but the city finally seemed to wake up. Just a week later, Bellevue decided it was time to give domestic partner benefits not only to same-sex couples, but to unmarried different-sex couples as well. Lambda Legal's efforts in drafting a convincing lawsuit and getting the media to the press conference made all the difference.

In the months following Bellevue's change of heart, the neighboring cities of Newcastle and Redmond, as well as Pierce County to the south, have all taken steps toward providing domestic partner benefits to their employees. It's heartening to see that our efforts have made such an impact beyond our own lives — and our own city. **L**

Doing the Right Thing: CONTAGIOUS!

The city of Redmond, Washington, has joined its neighbor Bellevue in offering the same family benefits to all public employees and their partners, regardless of sexual orientation.

As veteran police officers, Cmdr. Kristi Wilson and Lt. Betsy Lawrence have protected and served Redmond for a combined 30 years. Both are in committed relationships and raise children with their respective partners, but they were unable to obtain family

coverage under the city's health plan. Lambda Legal demanded that the city recognize the basic rights of these community members, including those who are entrusted with the safety and well-being of their fellow residents. Shortly thereafter, the city council voted in a late-night session to extend family benefits to city employees with same-sex partners. **Equal and fair treatment: it's spreading...**