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BRIAN McGRORY

Off course at golf club



Would someone please explain when it was that this country began to completely fall apart? When was it that everything became us vs. them, the rich vs. regular people, the 99 against the 1?

Why is it that we have an immovable stalemate in Washington, one that has prolonged what is probably the worst economy we will ever know? How is it that people began sleeping in Dewey Square? When is it that we stopped even pretending to work things out?

To that end, consider for a moment the idyllic environs of Willowbend Country Club on Cape Cod, a place of rolling hills, riots of flowers, and subtle stone walls, arguably one of the best manicured golf courses in Massachusetts. It's also, right now, America in a nutshell.

Willowbend is the creation of Paul Fireman, the footwear magnate who, legend has it, built the club and resort after he said he was denied membership at some of the older clubs on Cape Cod.

Which creates something of an irony, because he has just lost a sizable case against a once-prized employee before the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination — not once, but twice. In short, his best saleswoman accused Willowbend of firing her back in 2005 because she was 59 years old and the club was seeking to project a younger face to potential members and homeowners.

Virginia "Ginger" DiIorio was called into a conference room, ordered to put her keys on the table, and told to leave the premises. It didn't matter that she was a vice president or that she had worked there for 14 years or that she was a member of the golf club. It wasn't until she stammered something about a lawyer that they even let her clean out her desk.

Ends up, DiIorio was canned at the same time the financially strapped club was dismissing 13 workers, 10 of whom were over 50 years old. Don't for a moment think Willowbend was ham-handed about its intentions, but consider two small facts. First, a pair of administrative assistants, both in their 50s, were replaced by a 39-year-old former beauty queen. Second, Willowbend then ran a newspaper ad seeking job applicants that declared, "Our new era begins now."

Except if you're in your 50s.

Most of the dismissed workers signed their options away in exchange for a couple of weeks of severance pay, but not Ginger DiIorio. She brought her case to the MCAD, and after a 12-day hearing in 2009, she was awarded \$200,000 for emotional distress, \$359,000 in back pay on her salary and part of her estimated commissions, and another \$90,000 in front pay. This was good, since DiIorio, then in her 60s, had been unable to find a new job and was in dire need of money.

So Willowbend sent DiIorio a check with a heartfelt apology, right? Sure, just like freshmen Republicans in Congress have done everything possible to get this nation out of recession, just like Wall Street types have rejected multimillion-dollar bonuses at their bailed-out banks while unemployment is so high.

None of the above. Willowbend appealed to the full MCAD. A decision came down last week affirming the order, with two more years of interest and another \$314,000 in legal fees tacked on. The total is about \$1.4 million and counting.

I asked Marc Redlich, DiIorio's Boston-based lawyer, if Willowbend has said when it will pay. The answer: No.

"I'm concerned that Mr. Fireman and his company will drag Mrs. DiIorio out for another several years," Redlich said. The club can still appeal in Superior Court.

Fireman was unavailable yesterday afternoon, according to his spokesman, George Regan. Lawyers at two downtown firms representing him, Goulston & Storrs and Sullivan & Worcester, were Busy & Unable to return my calls.

Which means we are left where we began, with that huge rift between the haves and the have-nots, and acre upon acre of justifiable anger in between.

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