

opinion

TELEGRAPH HERALD

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our view

City must embrace culture change across departments

Last Sunday's TH exclusive on the culture in the Dubuque Fire Department shed light on issues that had been simmering for years.

When firefighter Jami Boss sued the City of Dubuque and the fire chief in September 2020 for sexual harassment, discrimination and retaliation, there likely were skeptics in the community who doubted her claims.

Even when a jury in February returned a verdict in her favor on the sexual harassment and discrimination allegations, awarding her \$575,000, there still might have been some residents who wondered whether things were really so bad.

That's not uncommon when problems are exposed within longstanding and respected institutions. The Dubuque Fire Department is just that. It is full of the brave and responsible civil employees we depend on in times of crisis — and they step up to the task.

But that doesn't mean the department as an institution is beyond needing introspective examination.

For more than two decades, women have been part of the fire department. But they weren't necessarily made to feel like part of the team. Instead, they were subject to a culture that was woefully lacking in the decorum that is standard in most places of business and that was home to behaviors that violate the law.

In particular, Boss was subjected to both sexual harassment and discrimination, the jury recently found. But based on trial transcripts and other documents examined by the TH, there is really no reason to think that other female firefighters in Dubuque had it much better, if at all.

Firehouses are unique because they are part workplace, part home as the job requires that, when on duty, firefighters eat, sleep and live on premises. Yet it is still a workspace of city employees, and the same rules apply that would govern any other office. Could you imagine a stash of pornography kept at City Hall? How about men walking into the women's restroom? A supervisor sexually harassing an intern?

Those things occurred within the fire department, and while it might not have been condoned at the highest levels of city government, it should have been rectified.

The fire department lawsuit comes less than a year after the city settled a lawsuit with then-Dubuque Police Department Capt. Abby Simon, who sued on the grounds of gender discrimination, harassment and retaliation. While the city noted the \$1.8 million settlement was "not an admission of any liability," why would the city agree to a settlement with such a large payment — three times what Boss was awarded at trial — unless there was validity to the claims?

The city is now at a critical juncture and has an opportunity to enact real change. The status quo reflected in these lawsuits is not acceptable.

In a written response to TH questions regarding the fire department culture, City Manager Mike Van Milligen and then-Chief Rick Steines wrote in part, "The city needs to take a hard look at itself and recognize where there are culture changes that need to be made. When we look in that mirror, we see that there is work that needs to be done, and we are committed to doing that work in all of our departments. We understand that this organizational change work is challenging and complex, but it is an opportunity for progress that will make us a better organization."

That's a good first step. We would call on the Dubuque City Council to make sure those changes are forthcoming and a structure for accountability is put in place. We urge city leaders to spell out specific benchmarks — and how and when they will be evaluated — to assess whether real change is being achieved, within both the police and fire departments.

New leadership at the helm of both departments could provide further momentum in those areas.

Jeremy Jensen was appointed Dubuque's police chief about a month ago, and that department has 17 officer positions to fill.

Meanwhile, Steines retired as of Thursday, and the fiscal year 2023 budget includes money to add seven more firefighter positions. As city leaders look to fill the role permanently and to increase the size of the department, they must ensure that the individual chosen to lead it in this new era understands and embraces the kind of culture the city seeks to promote.

Community leaders have long talked a good game in terms of making equity a priority in the city of Dubuque. Here is a prime opportunity to show active change and not just lip service by facilitating real transformation to create equitable and inclusive departments across city government.

Editorials reflect the consensus of the Telegraph Herald Editorial Board.



other view

Adventuring moves lead home

BY TIM TRENKLE
 For the Telegraph Herald



Our home on Stanton in Dubuque rested our bones for 15 years. We had neighbors, friends, river winds and Eagle Point Park

for picnics. We had moved there without the usual scrutiny of a home search, focused on the purchase of a gas station property in Shullsburg, Wis. Home became haven, chapel, respite, security and a part of us, as Rocky said, "If you stay in one place long enough, you become that place."

We left Stanton in 2018, having loved our home on the quiet street, with good neighbors and the soft river breezes. The Dairy Queen had been a baseball toss from our front door. Our leaving was for a better salary in Fort Dodge, Iowa, hired at the community college to teach.

We moved into our second home, on the shifting sands of the pandemic, a few miles from school. This home we blindly accepted, led by photos, moving by braille, sight unseen, with a Realtor's help. This home with the red door, a ranch on a good old lucky 13th Street, a white birch in the back yard, a nurse for a neighbor on one side and her sister on the other, became sentinel for the next home a few blocks away.

In these pandemic days, in our eyes and in our ears as the Beatles sang about Penny Lane, we moved to our third home, only a few blocks from 13th, now owners. The Fort Dodge house folded like a beautiful accordion, wrapped upon a spa-

cious yard, across the street from church, quiet if not serene, peaceful and looking like long term. We had passed retirement age but youth still whispered its hymns. Keep going, there's more.

Twenty-first Avenue now, home three in little more than a year. Yet the quiet of the street, home in its middle, three grand trees in the back yard with a garden set by railroad ties to create that space where tomatoes and beans might thrive empowered us. The largest tree on the block gave to us a mighty shade, and church across from us a mighty sanctity, with fields beyond and a sky with the blue depth of an ocean.

Were we looking for ourselves, as Rocky implied? The place we might become.

Ah, the pandemic. And we had been moving like bedouins through the seasons, over the hills, across the obstacles of wind and shifting economy.

At the start of 2021, the swift currents of economy tore our sails. We had to leave our fort, now back east, to Hopkinton, an hour from Dubuque, restless for family ready to escape the virus, looking for our once social lives and family interaction. We rented. As we left the place residents call Hoptown, carrying our possessions under the eaves of the back door, the landlord stood on the roof cleaning gutters. He diligently swept wet, black leaves down from the gutter to splash upon our shoulders. Wiping away debris from his carelessness, we heard him say, "sorry."

No one promised there wouldn't be a worldwide pandemic. Nor the life of nomads, detached landlords

and unsympathetic rotator cuffs. Ahh, this golden view.

The next domicile, our fifth in three years, set upon the Loras hillside of Dubuque, in a green duplex, across from Loras College, with the students climbing the hill, yet quiet, hospitable and peaceful. Haven five from Dubuque beginnings, and our aims for a better salary and an adventure. We found the magi here to greet us, the landlords like family, diligent and kind.

We're home in our Key City. Though moving day carried cold in the wind with seasons mixing, the howling sounds lashing the hill, hope lit its eternal flame.

"Looks like a bad winter," the previous Loras tenant had said as he delivered garbage to the curb.

Looking out the front windows, the sight of Loras' hills aligned with sunrise and the river horizon. The house across the street had lights in every window. Christmas stood at close range, an arrow might have sped through time and found its mark, home at last.

Our next home, staying on Loras only months, was set near the dam. We knew the street well. The house on Lincoln Avenue was fixed under a limestone face in our backyard, two blocks from where we had begun our adventure on Stanton, a trail of six homes, back from the wild yonder, some of it blue, some of it tiring and all of it filled with wonder. Good to be home.

Tim Trenkle is a community college teacher, resident of Dubuque and the author of two books about Dubuque.

letters to the editor THLETTERS@THMEDIA.COM

Farm crops more than food on the table Dubuque City Council isn't listening

Mary Hayward
 182nd Avenue, Maquoketa, Iowa

Very interesting article in Friday's paper about Ag Week. However, it did raise a couple questions. What percentage of corn is raised for the purpose of making ethanol? Farmers raise crops for more reasons than "putting food on the table." Today's politicians promote ethanol quite a bit.

I also wonder why President Trump was not mentioned when discussing the last three years of roller coaster farming. His international trade decisions had major impacts on different places in our economy, certainly including farming. And his reaction to COVID-19 altered its effect on lives and livelihoods.

Rick Trausch
 Bradley Street, Dubuque

Quote from this week's TH story: "Despite protests from a local resident and city commission, Dubuque City Council members expressed support for the implementation of an automated trash collection system."

Reason: Because other big cities in Iowa have them. This is really a lame excuse. The real reason: Because the City Council is incompetent, condescending and narcissistic.

A perfect example is this quote from Ric Jones: "This is how it needs to work."

One way to fix the problem is to vote them out and elect people who will listen to the people who elected them.



The First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."