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## TENACIOUS ATTORNEY FIGHTS FOR L.A. FIREFIGHTER'S CAUSE

**By Max Follmer**

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LOS ANGELES - Growing up in the Davy Crockett National Forest in east Texas, Genie Harrison wanted a horse so badly it was the only thing she put on her Christmas list for 11 years.

"I figured if I gave them no option then I had to get it," Harrison said. "I was already in negotiation mode. It was strategy. Strategy 101."

Harrison had to wait until she was an adult to get her horse - Florian, a European Warmblood Dressage horse.

But she is hoping her negotiating strategy pays off a bit faster for her current client, Tennie Pierce, the African-American firefighter who was fed dog food at a Los Angeles firehouse, and whose lawsuit has roiled City Hall and the Los Angeles Fire Department for weeks.

Already, the city's handling of Pierce's case has led to the resignation of the department's chief, William Bamattre. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa named Douglas L. Barry interim fire chief Dec. 4, one day after Bamattre resigned.

Villaraigosa's veto of a proposed \$2.7 million settlement with Pierce means the lawsuit will now go to trial March 19. *Tennie Pierce v. City of Los Angeles*, BC342845.

Harrison, who will play a pivotal role in one of the most talked-about trials in Southern California, said that in law school she never would have imagined herself standing in the well of a courtroom.

"Honestly, I did not want to be a trial attorney. I didn't want to have anything to do with being a trial attorney because I wanted to have a life," she said. "I really wanted to be living in Europe."

Harrison, who grew up in Nacogdoches and El Paso, Texas, and graduated from high school at 15, eventually enrolled at Santa Clara University's School of Law with an eye toward doing human rights work at the United Nations in Geneva.

A third-year law school course on employment discrimination and sexual harassment "ignited a passion" for Harrison that she said galvanized her career.

After clerking for Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Aurelio Munoz, Harrison joined Margolis, Hertzberg & Morin, the old firm of former state Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg.

"I should have called him and told him to tell the mayor not to veto my settlement," Harrison joked over a recent lunch at Engine Co. No. 28, a downtown restaurant in a 1912 firehouse.

A stint at Plotkin, Marutani & Kyriacou was followed by work at O'Donnell & Harrison, a firm which has since dissolved.

While there, Harrison signed on as co-counsel with Patricia Bellasalma in a race-discrimination class action against the county in which a jury unanimously awarded members of the Los Angeles County Police Department \$150 million in back pay and lost future wages. *Frank v. County of Los Angeles* BC198771 (L.A. Super. Ct. filed Oct. 8, 1998).

Her success in the *Frank* case attracted the attention of attorney Barrett S. Litt, who was in the midst of one of the longest civil cases in recent memory in Los Angeles, *McClure v. City of Long Beach* CV92-27776 (C.D. Cal. filed May 7, 1992).

Litt hired Harrison to help him try the McClure case, in which a Long Beach woman claimed the city unlawfully prevented her from opening an Alzheimer's treatment center. Litt and Harrison's client was awarded \$22.5 million by a jury after three months of deliberation.

The team worked so well together that in June 2004, Litt and Harrison formed Litt, Estuar, Harrison, Miller & Kitson, a downtown Los Angeles firm that specializes in civil rights and employment discrimination.

Robert Kitson, a name partner, says that his colleagues sometimes call Harrison "the Texas Tornado" because of her high energy level.

"She's tenacious. Genie doesn't let go," Kitson said. "It brings defense counsel to the table. And if they don't come to the table, they tangle with her in court."

Kitson said Harrison is incredibly quick on her feet in a courtroom and speaks well extemporaneously.

"She also knows when to sit down," he said. "She knows when she's done."

Tennie Pierce's original attorney in the case, Gregory A. Cole, a Century City attorney, praised Harrison's commitment to her clients, who sometimes call her at 12:30 in the morning.

But it is Harrison's diligence, Cole said, that is her real strength. He said she does months of research before proceeding on a case.

"She doesn't go around and file frivolous lawsuits," Cole said. "She is not going to be an advocate for a cause where she hasn't done her homework."

Although she thought that former Fire Chief Bamattre could have done more to change the working environment in the department, she does "not relish the notion of anyone losing a career that they love. That's what happened to Mr. Pierce."

Asked whether she thought her client would end up with more than the \$2.7 million that has caused such a stir, Harrison declined to speculate.

"That's up to the jury," she said. "The one thing I know is that you can't predict what a jury is going to do."