

Reverse bias suit settlement debated

By Kendall Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Calling the settlement "anti-climactic," a white teacher who charged her civil rights when she was laid off in favor of a black teacher said she was happy to bring closure to the case.

Sharon Taxman, 50, said she was glad the case was over. She said the \$443,500 settlement she received was "kind of anti-climactic."

The Piscataway, N.J. school board decided Nov. 20 not to appeal Sharon Taxman's case before the U.S. Supreme Court, voting 5-3 to settle the \$443,500 suit.

The move came after the Black Leadership Forum, an alliance of civil rights groups, agreed to pay 70 percent of the settlement.

The board believed the nation's highest court has grown increasingly hostile to race-based

policies in recent years, and thought a Supreme Court ruling would have a ripple court on affirmative action nationwide.

Taxman lost her job in the business department in 1989, while Debra Williams, a black teacher, was kept.

Both were hired the same day and considered equally qualified by the school board. Taxman had more teaching experience.

Williams had superior academic credentials, including a master's degree. Taxman charged that she was laid off because she was white.

Williams, in tears after the confirmation of the settlement, insisted she was far more qualified than Taxman, saying that having an advanced degree apparently means nothing "but a slap in the face."

Meanwhile, advocates and opponents of

affirmative action read different messages into the settlement.

"The great debate on affirmative action will go on in Congress, the states and the lower courts because affirmative action is legal," said Kathy Rogers, executive director of the National Organization of Women's Legal Defense and Educational Fund. "It works, it's necessary and it's fair."

Clint Bolick of the conservative Institute for Justice in Washington, said, "This settlement demonstrates the panic within the civil rights establishment. This could have been a knockout blow for racial preferences."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who helped to raise some of the money in the settlement, described the case as one "riddled with problems."

"The black teacher has a master's degree and

the white teacher doesn't," he said. "So, they are not equals academically. This case would have been distortion of the issue."

Taxman's attorney, Steven Klausner, said it was obvious to him that "they (civil rights groups) were afraid that affirmative action might be very damaged."

But NAACP President Kweisi agreed with Jackson about the damage that the "distortion" of the facts could have brought to the fight to maintain affirmative action.

"Distorted facts make for distorted laws," he said. "It was in the best interests of the nation that the future of affirmative action be based on a clearly articulated record and not on a case that the extreme right wing has distorted and defined as something else."

First black astronaut honored nearly 30 yrs. after death

Special to Sentinel-Voice

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — America's first black astronaut, Air Force Maj. Robert Lawrence Jr., took his rightful place in history on Monday, 30 years to the day after his death in a jet crash.

Relatives shouted "Yes!" when foundation president Jim De Santis announced: "Maj. Robert H. Lawrence Jr., an outstanding American, scholar, pilot and, yes, astronaut."

"History being rewritten — and corrected," said Lawrence's widow, Barbara Lawrence.

Barbara and nearly 50 family members were among 350 people gathered for the ceremony at the Astronauts Memorial Foundation's Space Mirror. The ceremony, rife with Air Force and NASA pageantry, featured the addition of Lawrence's name to the astronauts' memorial at Kennedy Space Center after a long bureaucratic dispute over the definition of an astronaut.

"Thank God it is settled," said his mother, Gwendolyn Duncan, "and he is being recognized for his contribution, certainly a supreme

contribution."

The 32-year-old test pilot was killed on Dec. 8, 1967, in the crash of an F-104 fighter during a training exercise.

He never flew the required 50 miles up to earn his Air Force astronaut's wings. But he was a member of the Air Force's manned orbiting laboratory program, and had he lived, he probably would have transferred over to NASA, as many of his colleagues did after the Air Force canceled the program in 1969.

NASA didn't choose its first black astronauts until 1978. And the first of them, Guy Bluford, didn't reach space until 1983.

Because the Astronauts Memorial Foundation refused to recognize Lawrence as an astronaut until the Air Force did so formally, his name was barred from the four-story, granite Space Mirror. The foundation is a private organization formed after the 1986 Challenger disaster to honor astronauts killed on the

job.

Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., intervened last year, saying Lawrence's omission was a matter of "institutional racism." He persuaded the Air Force to confirm Lawrence's status as an astronaut last January. The foundation voted two weeks later to place his

name alongside the 16 others.

"Bob's memory, it can stand for a lot of things for a lot of people, especially other African-Americans," Lawrence said. "And so we are very, very glad that that part of it has come to be and that people will see him and use him as an inspiration."

Mandela

(Continued from Page 3)

"You are no longer sure whether the enemy is still just the third force alone when you see certain things happening in the country, when you see the TRC, when you see Desmond Tutu hugging Pik Botha, when he walks into the TRC and actually applauds and thanks the perpetrators of the brutality and atrocities," Madikizela-Mandela said.

In the interview, she charged that the ANC was failing to deliver on its promises and its programs were in contrast to the Freedom Charter which guided it through the struggle. She also accused the leadership of not letting "the people" govern.

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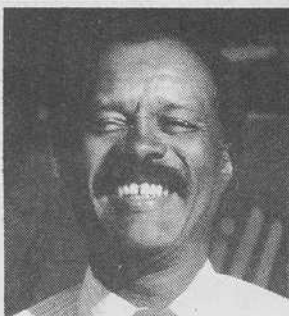
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