

FIRED PUSLINCH FIREFIGHTER SEEKS TO CLEAR HIS NAME

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Six years after his exit from the Puslinch Township Fire Department Roger Will says he wants back in -- so he can retire. A full-time firefighter with the City of Vaughan since 2001, Will has asked Puslinch officials to consider undoing his 2003 termination from the township's volunteer department where he once worked as fire prevention officer and training and safety officer. But his request is seemingly not on the township's agenda.

"I just want to be hired back, so I can retire (with a clean employment record). . . . It's not about money," Will said, sitting at a kitchen table in his longtime Puslinch home. He said he would retire immediately after his name was cleared. Will said he believes his complaints to the Ministry of Labour about health and safety concerns are behind the town's disinterest in reviewing this matter. He said he noticed things he considered safety issues around 1998 after taking courses and researching local and provincial policies. A stack of records from his more than 15 years with the Puslinch fire department outline a litany of complaints he brought forward.

Many related to procedural matters, Will said. And, it seems the bulk were addressed after he was fired, as newer provincial regulations became more mainstream, including the mandatory use of balaclavas, a protective headgear. A stack of 16 safety concern forms he retained show Will flagged a range of issues. Among them: regulating equipment checks; providing nutritious food to firefighters after fire calls; and demanding additional protective clothing such as balaclavas.

"I wasn't just complaining, I was suggesting remedies," Will said. Will said he reported his concerns to the Ministry of Labour after taking them to then fire chief Doug Smith and later Mayor Brad Whitcombe.

Whitcombe did not return phone calls or emails for comment for the story.

According to Smith's witness statement from a small claims court case that Will started then dropped over his firing, Will was terminated because of insubordination and communication problems. "I have worked with Roger Will for a long time and in my opinion, Roger has a problem with taking instructions and with insubordination towards his superiors," Smith's statement reads. "He likes to interpret the rules in his own way so as to best suit his own needs and he has a difficult time communicating with others."

Will initiated the case against Smith in late 2003. He said it was the only litigation he could afford. The case was dropped shortly before Smith's Dec. 31, 2005, retirement. In a telephone interview, Smith said administrative issues were the lead factor in Will's termination. One of Will's safety concern forms, this one dated May 13, 2002, asserts that Smith threatened Will's dismissal over Will "contacting the Ministry of Labour for obtaining a letter/information about the need to acquire balaclavas." Smith said he's familiar with that accusation but it's untrue and he never threatened to fire anyone. "No, that never happened. I was accused of it, though," he said. Smith said he had several dealings with the Ministry of Labour, including around balaclavas, but insists the fire department was never penalized over the matters Will raised. It was more of a back-and-forth communication, he said.

As for Will's request to have his name cleared, Smith says it's between current township officials and Will. "You can never go back and correct history and if you think you can you are wasting your time," he said. Will emailed the township last month asking for reconsideration. Township Chief Administrative Officer Brenda Law responded that the township wasn't interested. "I don't wish to comment on Roger's termination because it was a long time ago, it's a thing of the past, it's over," said Law.

Martin Yates, a volunteer firefighter who worked with Will and continues to work with the fire department, said he sometimes disagreed with how Will handled his concerns. But he said health and safety issues Will tried to raise were done with a conscientious spirit. Yates said improvements including supplying enhanced safety equipment, such as balaclavas, followed Will's advocacy.