

Hospital Rabbi Fired After Museum Shooting

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A few weeks after comforting the family of U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum security guard Stephen T. Johns as he lay dying at George Washington University Hospital, Rabbi Tamara Miller -- the hospital's head of spiritual care -- wrote about the experience.

"At 1 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, racism and bigotry rang out on the National Mall," she wrote, recounting the June 10 shooting of the guard, allegedly by an avowed white supremacist. "A mere thirty minutes later, unconditional love, contagious compassion, brotherhood and sisterhood permeated the hospital corridors."

The essay was published in June on washingtonpost.com's On Faith blog. Five weeks later, the hospital fired her.

The hospital told her that the essay and other comments she made to a Washington Post reporter about Johns's death violated hospital policy and federal rules governing patient privacy. Earlier hospital memos to Miller cited other performance issues. But Miller said that she didn't reveal any private information and that the firing is in retaliation for her complaints that she was paid less than men in comparable jobs.

"I wrote the article because it had to be written, and then to be punished for it, and to be fired for it, seems completely insensitive," said Miller, 62. "The crime did not fit the punishment."

A hospital spokesman, Rolando Irizarry, declined to comment on Miller's firing, saying it was "hospital policy not to make any comment on former employees."

The day of the shooting, Miller received a phone call about an emergency at the Holocaust Museum. A short time later, she was holding hands and praying with Zakiah Johns, Stephen Johns's wife, as doctors fought to save the 39-year-old man's life. As the afternoon went on, Miller and two other hospital chaplains ministered to a growing number of distraught family members.

"Inside the operating room, doctors of every faith and cultural background gathered their medical skills to save their wounded patient whose big heart had stopped beating," she wrote in her essay. "Outside the operating room, there was waiting and wailing, praying and punctuated sobbing."

Miller also attended Johns's funeral service at Ebenezer AME Church in Fort Washington. In a story that ran in The Post the next day, she was quoted as saying that she felt compelled to come "not just as a rabbi, but as a Jewish person who gave comfort and care that was a light on what was a very dark day."

The hospital suspended Miller in late July and then fired her a week later for misconduct. In its suspension notice to Miller, the hospital said it took action because of her essay and her comments to The Post. The hospital contended that both violated HIPAA, the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, which is designed to protect confidential patient information, because Miller referred to Johns and mentioned his treatment and death.

The hospital also said Miller violated hospital policy that forbids any staff person from talking to the media without first contacting the hospital's media and public relations department. It said it sent an e-mail reminding staff members and doctors about the policy one day after the shooting.

Miller said the firing is a retaliation by the hospital because of her salary complaint. She said she revealed nothing more in her interview and essay than what was already in the media. (The dispute was first reported in Washington Jewish Week.)

Lisa McDonald, the hospital's director of marketing and business development, said the media policy is needed to ensure that staff members do not violate patient privacy and that consent for publicity is obtained from patients' families. "The hospital's viewpoint is that she did release patient information," even if it had been widely publicized already, McDonald said.

Miller has the support of the Johns's family pastor, who has praised the essay and said it didn't violate the family's privacy.

The Rev. John McCoy, pastor of the Word of God Baptist Church in Southeast Washington, said Johns's widow was touched by Miller's article.

"It's unbelievable that she would be fired in any type of way associated with that case," said McCoy. "I think that's a travesty of justice."

For Miller, Johns's killing was an emotional issue, bringing together traumatic events from her past. Her parents and grandparents left Europe before World War II. But growing up, she remembers family friends, bearing numbered tattoos from their years in concentration camps, sitting around her parents' kitchen table counting their lost loved ones.

To her, Johns became an additional victim of the Holocaust because his alleged killer, James W. von Brunn, 88, is an admitted white supremacist who wrote anti-Semitic material. A U.S. District Court judge has ordered that von Brunn, who was severely injured in the incident, undergo a mental competency exam before he is arraigned.

Johns "was defending me, in a way," and the memory of the 6 million Jews massacred in the Holocaust, Miller said.

A veteran health-care chaplain, Miller joined George Washington Hospital in 2001 as the hospital's first paid professional chaplain. She was named director of spiritual care in 2004 and built up the spiritual-care department to include 12 part-time, paid chaplains.

But Miller said problems developed in 2007 after she learned that her \$88,000 salary was between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year less than male directors of spiritual care at other local health-care facilities. Miller said the hospital rejected her request for a raise, contending that she was being paid more than other people in comparable positions.

Relations between Miller and her employer deteriorated, and Miller's high performance ratings began to fall. The hospital warned Miller in March and June about "inattention to duties or unsatisfactory job performance," which Miller denies. A memo from McDonald said Miller was unaware of other chaplains' schedules, failed to follow her supervisor's directions and hired an unqualified chaplain.

Miller said the accusations are untrue. Her firing, she said, was "like a double attack on my soul."