



Iowa Woman Fired for Being Attractive Looks Back and Moves On

By: Eric Strauss -August 2, 2013

Ever thought you could be too good-looking for your own good?

Melissa Nelson, 33, didn't either. Then she was fired from her job in Fort Dodge, Iowa, as a dental assistant, after 10 years, simply because her boss found her irresistibly attractive – and a threat to his marriage.

"All she ever wanted to do was be a dental assistant," said Nelson's husband, Steve Nelson, in an interview with "20/20" correspondent Paula Faris. The former high school sweethearts have two young children.

"She wanted to work for Dr. Knight's office, so she job shadowed there, she got a job there and just everything fell into place," Steve Nelson continued. "She loved her job."

Melissa Nelson worked side by side for Dr. James Knight eight hours a day for a decade.

"It was a fun working environment," she said. She viewed Knight as a father figure and mentor, and when Nelson had both of her children, Knight visited with his family.

Around when Knight turned 50, Nelson said, he changed. He began to work out.

"He became more confident and more outgoing," Nelson said.

Midlife crisis?

"That's the only thing I could come up with," Nelson said.

Their friendship -- they would exchange text messages during off hours -- went from cordial to creepy, she said.

"He would ask me about my personal life. He would ask me how often I would have sex."

Nelson said she once answered in a way implying "not much," and Knight responded, "that's like having a Lamborghini in the garage and never driving it."

He warned her, "if you see my pants bulging, you'll know your clothes are too revealing."

Nelson's attire consisted of a standard scrub suit. On humid days she removed her lab coat, under which she wore a simple crew neck t-shirt.

Nelson said she did not flirt with Knight and was "absolutely not" attracted to him. She never led him on, she insisted.

Nelson brushed off her boss' comments for six months, hoping they would stop.

They did, but not in a way she would have expected or wanted.

Knight's wife discovered her husband was texting with Nelson while the Knights were on vacation – and made sure it would end.

"His wife came in [the office] with a purple folder, and just sat it on his desk, and walked out without saying anything," Nelson recalled.

Knight called a meeting with Nelson, then brought in a man.

"I found later that it was his minister from church," Nelson said.

The three-person meeting began, and the purple folder was opened. The dentist read a statement and told Melissa she was fired.

"Dr. Knight said I couldn't work in the office, because he was becoming attracted to me, and not able to focus on his family, and his family life. ... I instantly broke down in tears. All I remember is just sitting there, and not able to get up, telling him that I love my job."

Steve Nelson rushed to the dentist's office.

"I said, 'What's going on? Is there a mistake?!'" Steve Nelson said. "He said, 'I got feelings for your wife, and it's affecting my family.' ... I want you to know, Steve, that your wife has done nothing wrong."

"I got really angry," Steve Nelson went on. "Why would those thoughts even cross his mind? This is my wife. Why is he thinking of her as an object?"

The news also infuriated some in the tight-knit, reserved town of 25,000 people.

Ruth and Jerry Hancock were patients of Knight.

"I always enjoyed seeing her," Jerry Hancock said. "She was very professional, friendly. I have just never, ever seen her do anything inappropriate."

"Then all of a sudden ... we find this attraction as being a reason to let her go," Ruth Hancock added. "I don't think that's justified."

They found a new dentist, they said.

Knight gave Nelson a month's severance for her 10 years of stellar work, but she decided to fight back.

"I think more than anything -- I was hurt," Nelson said.

In August 2010, Nelson filed a gender discrimination suit against Knight, seeking damages and lost pay, in Iowa District Court. The judge dismissed the case before trial.

Knight declined repeated requests for an interview. In court he didn't disagree with Nelson's characterization of the facts. His attorney told ABC News: "... she was not terminated because of her gender, but to preserve the best interest of his marriage."

However, Paige Fiedler, Nelson's attorney, said, "We had admission after admission after admission from the defendant himself that her sex played a part in his decision."

In September 2012 the Iowa Supreme Court heard Melissa's appeal. In December the seven justices ruled that although the one month's severance was "ungenerous," it is OK to terminate an employee "simply because the boss views the employee as an irresistible attraction." Especially since the boss's wife felt her marriage was threatened.

"I don't think the law is out of touch. ... This guy is a jerk, but being a jerk is not illegal," said Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute.

"You can fire someone for being tall, for being short, for cheering for the wrong team ... all sorts of really stupid things that don't make any business sense, but are not illegal," Shapiro said.

Unless you are part of a "protected class," Fiedler counters.

"Your gender, color, race, national origin, religion, disability, age, pregnancy -- those are all things that it's illegal to fire an employee for."

"She was fired because he felt that their relationship was affecting his marriage," and that's not a strictly gender issue, Shapiro said, adding that Nelson did not complain about the personal comments and questions Knight sent her.

In the court of public opinion, the ruling surprised – and stung.

Rekha Basu wrote a scathing column for the Des Moines Register, calling the all-male Supreme Court's decision "embarrassing."

"I think a female justice working through her own first-hand experience and perspective would have had a different take on it," Basu said in an interview with Faris. "Women are judged on the basis of their appearance, even though they're in jobs that have nothing to do with appearance. ... A man would never be terminated for being too handsome."

Nelson filed yet another appeal, and last month the court agreed to reconsider its earlier ruling – a rare occurrence.

The same seven judges came up with the same ruling, clarifying that you can be fired "...because the boss's spouse views the relationship between the boss and the employee as a threat to her marriage."

Nelson, out of legal options, hasn't pursued another full-time job as a dental assistant.

"I think my biggest fear is trusting someone ... that I have to work that close to. I wouldn't want to be hurt again."

Now, the dental assistant who once earned a good salary with benefits by day is scraping by on tips waiting tables at a local sports bar at night. Working nights means she spends much less time with her children.

"I tuck 'em in two nights a week. That's it," she said, crying.

She doesn't see Knight around town, Nelson said.

"I see his lawyer. ... He comes and eats at the restaurant that I work at. I could either pick my head up and go with it, or I can walk away with my tail between my legs. And I'm not going to let that happen."