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Women claim discrimination

By SUSAN L. HAHN
Gazette Staff Writer

A former employe of the Elwood School District says she will file a formal complaint this week with the Kansas State Commission on Civil Rights charging the district with discriminatory hiring practices.

Mrs. Jessica Davis, Elwood, said the charges stem from the fact that she was told by school officials she was no longer qualified for the job she held last year. She said she felt she was turned down because she was black.

Mrs. Davis was hired at the elementary school last year as an aide to the superintendent, but she was not rehired this year although, she says, she was led to believe she would be rehired.

A second black woman, Mrs. Jerri Tatum, said she also is considering filing charges with the commission. Mrs. Tatum also was employed at the school last year, and expects to begin work again Monday, but only after what she said has been a long battle.

Both women say they were discriminated against at the school and, they said, they believe other black persons who applied for positions at the school may have been turned down for good positions because they were black.

Superintendent Ernest Hill said Tuesday he was unaware that charges might be filed. He said he had heard accusations of discriminatory hiring practices at the school, but he denied there had been any discrimination in his office.

In case of possible court action, Hill said he did not want to comment further on the allegations, and that a court of law would have to decide the issue if it went that far.

Mrs. Davis said she was hired as a superintendent's aide last year, running errands and doing secretarial work. She was switched to a secretary's job in the principal's office when the new principal began working at the school last year.

In filling out insurance forms for herself, Mrs. Davis said she needed to know her title at the school. When she asked, she was told she had no specific title, she said. She was being paid about a minimum wage at the school with Comprehensive Employment Training Act funds. Mrs. Davis said she is a graduate of the Platt business school in St. Joseph.

The Rev. David Rogers, minister at the First Baptist Church in Elwood, of which Mrs. Davis is a member, said it was his understanding that Mrs. Davis had been assigned some duties at the school for which she had not been hired and for which she was not qualified.

He said she was even told to do some teaching, which was unfair to her and to the students because she was not qualified as a teacher.

Mrs. Davis said she never complained about working conditions or pay because she was afraid she would be fired. She didn't mind losing the job so much for herself, she said, but she wanted to be at the school so black children would have someone to talk to if they needed help.

"When (black) kids got a raw deal, I tried to intervene," she said. The principal didn't like that, she said, because he felt they should come to him.

Both Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Tatum said they believe they were hired at the school to get the support of the black community in Elwood for a bond issue to build a new school. Mrs. Davis said black persons in Elwood were excited and happy when she and Mrs. Tatum were hired.

"They thought things had changed," she said, "they were finally hiring blacks at the school. That made a big difference in how black people voted on the bond issue. But when they (school officials) got what they wanted, they found excuses not to rehire us."

The bond issue to build a new school was passed earlier this year and architectural plans for the building are to be completed by Oct. 1. The school then will advertise for building bids.

Mrs. Tatum was a secretary-clerk at the school last year. She said when she applied for a job this year she was told, at first, she would not be rehired. Then, she said, Hill told her she could be rehired if she could get CETA funds to pay her.

Mrs. Tatum said she told Hill she had read in the newspaper during the summer that CETA had gone broke, and his response was, "Oh, that is right, isn't it."

Mrs. Tatum said she contacted CETA officials anyway, and when she explained the situation she was told reserve funds from CETA could be used to pay her salary at the school.

She said she assumed she would get her same job back, but she was told she would be working in the library this year. "We (the black women) were told we weren't good enough for the same jobs we did last year," Mrs. Tatum claims.

She said she felt the school was trying to discourage her from taking the job by giving her a lesser job with a cut in salary. She said she was given tests for her old job and knew she had a good score, but administrators claimed her score wasn't good enough to be a secretary-clerk.

"They said, 'You ought to be glad you're getting that job,' " she said of school officials.

After both women applied for work again this year, though they were told they would not be rehired, they said the school lost their applications. They got more applications and sent them to the school by registered mail so they would have proof the school had received the applications. They soon received rejection notices from the school, also by registered mail, they said.