

Police officer sues to be beauty contestant

by Mark Arner

SAN DIEGO - A Chula Vista police officer is suing the Police Department and the city, alleging her supervisors pressured her to stop competing in beauty pageants.

Officer Deanna Mory, hired in 2005, says police administrators began pressuring her a year ago to stop competing in pageants. The Chula Vista Police Officers' Association, the police union, has filed two lawsuits on her behalf against the city and the department.

Mory, 23, said the dispute began when she told her boss on Jan. 4, 2006, that she had been named Ms. California by a Florida-based pageant organization, and she wanted to compete in the group's 2006 Ms. United States pageant.

Ms. United States 2006 - California

Her immediate supervisor, Lt. Mike Becker, told her the pageant would not violate a department policy regarding outside activities, she said. Two weeks later, other department administrators ordered her to give up the Ms. California title and to withdraw from the national contest, Mory said.

Union representatives said they tried to negotiate a compromise with Mory's bosses but failed. They then sued on July 19, three days before the national pageant, alleging police supervisors were enforcing a policy in a way that discriminated against female police officers by denying them their constitutional right to free speech. The department allows officers to participate in outside competitions, such as a "Baker-to-Vegas bike competition," the union's lawsuit states.

The union sued again March 13, alleging that in January nine lieutenants and top city and police officials pressured the union into dropping the first lawsuit. The lawsuit claims the officials violated a law banning government employers from restraining or denying the exercise of employees' constitutional rights.

Amid the litigation, Mory has remained a national pageant contestant. In July she placed second and won a spirit award. In January she was named Ms. California 2007 and is preparing to compete in the Ms. United States pageant in July.

Mory said she is frustrated by the legal battle but believes she made the right decision. She said many male officers praised her for challenging a vague policy they feel unfairly limits their off-duty activities.

"People have come up to me and said 'Thank you for doing this ... It's been a long time in coming,' " Mory said. "I'm not going to stop being myself because of somebody else's opposition that doesn't seem to have rhyme or reason."

Chula Vista Police Chief Rick Emerson declined comment on the lawsuits this week. Liz Pursell, a city spokeswoman, issued a statement stating the lawsuits have "no merit."

Bart C. Miesfeld, an assistant city attorney, in August wrote a response to the first lawsuit that confirmed the names and ranks of several officers alleged to have discussed the pageant, but denied all allegations of

wrongdoing. The city is working on a response to the second lawsuit, Pursell said.

The city's "Incompatible Activities Code" prohibits all employees, including police officers, from "engaging in any outside employment, enterprise or activity for compensation that is not expressly authorized by the city ... "

The Ms. United States pageant awards a \$500 check and gifts to winners and provides gifts to those who place second through fourth.

The city's policy doesn't ban any specific activity and officials wouldn't say what part of the policy Mory violated.

Mory said it was ironic that police supervisors ordered her to withdraw from the pageant because she believes the 16 years she has spent competing in beauty pageants gave her some of the skills she needed to become a police officer.

"When I started competing at age 7," Mory said, "my parents tell me I was so shy I wouldn't even talk to my grandparents on the phone. Doing pageants has not only taught me communication skills, it has taught me how to prepare for interviews."

Mory has a bachelor's in criminal justice from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. She also has a minor in geology, which she said she pursued to help her gather "geologic forensic evidence."

Fred Rowbotham, president of the Chula Vista Police Officers' Association, said the union filed the first lawsuit before the pageant to prevent her from being fired. He said union representatives then met with Chief Emerson and Capt. Donald Hunter, who supervises all patrol officers, to resolve the dispute, but failed.

This month the union's board sent a letter to members after nine lieutenants attended a January meeting with union representatives and urged them to drop the first lawsuit. The letter explained why the union filed the lawsuits and assured members it could afford the litigation.

Union representatives met with Hunter and Emerson to try to resolve the dispute and failed, it said.

"As no other method of resolution was provided for (in our contract), we felt our only remedy was litigation," the letter stated.