

[Home](#)

[|| NEWS ||](#)

[Advocate 40th Anniversary Site](#)

[11/10/07-11/12/07](#)

[News](#)

## Lesbian Wins Multimillion-Dollar Discrimination Suit Against Goodyear

[Exclusives](#)

A Washington State lesbian has been awarded nearly \$4.4 million in a lawsuit she filed against her former employer, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., and a supervisor, alleging unlawful retaliation that eventually led to her dismissal.

[Blogs](#)

[Advocate Insider](#)

[Mr. Sardonic](#)

[GenQ](#)

Melissa Sheffield claimed that her supervisors' negative reaction to her sexuality was the beginning of a process that culminated in her demotion and termination.

[Current Issue](#)

[Issue Archives](#)

In a November 8 decision, a jury in King County, Wash., awarded Sheffield more than \$318,000 in lost past wages, more than \$40,000 in lost and future benefits, and \$4 million in emotional distress in a suit filed against the company and her former supervisor, Randy Reich.

[Personals](#)

[Poll](#)

[Letters](#)

According to a court brief filed by her attorneys, Sheffield, 47, began working at Goodyear store in Seattle in 1994 and became a store manager in 1999, a position in which she won a corporate excellence award. Things started going downhill at the end of 2002, after she brought her girlfriend to a managers' dinner that was also attended by another store manager, Waide Adams.

[LGBT Resources](#)

[Newsletter](#)

### SUBSCRIBE

[Print Edition](#)

[Digital Edition](#)

### SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

[Print Edition](#)

[Digital Edition](#)

In 2003, Reich became Sheffield's new boss, and he made Adams her new team leader. Within six weeks Reich and Adams began investigating Sheffield, and they found billing improprieties and asked her to sign a statement acknowledging her mistakes. Sheffield complied. Soon after, a new service manager, Dave Johnson, was transferred to Sheffield's store. The court brief states Johnson informed employees he knew Sheffield was gay and that he didn't like gays. When Sheffield approached him about his bringing a gun to work (in violation of Goodyear policy), Johnson threatened to "pull it out and

urinate all over [her] with it" if Sheffield made him mad. Sheffield alleged that Reich took no action when she lodged a complaint against Johnson and was retaliated against when she took the matter to corporate human resources.

The brief goes on to report that after a two-month investigation, Johnson was terminated, but Sheffield was demoted over the billing irregularities and an accusation from Johnson that she had engaged in "inappropriate kissing" at the store with her girlfriend. She was transferred to another store, where her pay went from \$55,000 a year to \$13 an hour. Because of an earlier on-the-job injury, Sheffield could not work the new job, since it required heavy lifting. After 18 months on a leave of absence for full worker's compensation and physical rehab, Sheffield tried to return to work with the restriction on heavy lifting. A new district manager who replaced Reich refused to give her any position, and Sheffield was terminated. In her suit, Sheffield also claimed she was denied access to her personnel records.

"These events were devastating, but I wanted to take a stand for my children and my community, and I am grateful for the jury's courage and understanding," Sheffield said in a statement."

"We were really pleased," said attorney Daniel Johnson, who handled the case for Sheffield. "We always felt we were right and we would win. They [the jury] found the situation was intolerable. It was a strong statement to employers that this behavior was not acceptable."

In a statement sent to *The Advocate* Friday, Goodyear said it "respectfully disagrees with the jury's verdict in this case and is reviewing avenues to have it overturned or reversed. The company cannot discuss specific details of the case. Goodyear remains committed to fair work practices, including a work environment free from any discrimination or retaliation."

According to the company's Web site, Goodyear's corporate nondiscrimination policy includes a zero-tolerance policy for harassment based on sexual orientation. (Chris Lisotta, *The Advocate*)