

*“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”*

Teddy Roosevelt’s “Man in the Arena” has been my inspiration and reminder that whatever the outcome may be, for better or for worse; what really matters is stepping into the arena and daring greatly. I am writing today because I believe justice is possible. The system we have in the United States may not be perfect, some have called it broken, but after this past Monday, my faith in the system to protect the rights of ordinary citizens taking action remains strong.

I began working for VBLS in 2005. I had my first rescue, my second rescue, my third rescue and my first body recovery in the same day. I came from a competitive swimming background in high school and went on to play water polo in college. Nothing can compare to how fulfilling it is to put that background to use and save someone’s life. It is unbelievably gratifying to be in a position to help and then act in a way that it is literally lifesaving. VBLS’s unofficial slogan: “Saving lives, making a difference” is simply stated but no exaggeration.

Lifeguarding for me was not only fulfilling but also therapeutic. I’ve always struggled with type-A, perfectionist tendencies and even though my high school relay team was state champions, All-Americans, missed a national record by .11 hundredths of a second, and I started in almost every water polo game I played in college, I never felt good enough. But with VBLS, I was always good enough to save lives. And that feels pretty damn good.

VBLS is an incredibly tight community of lifesavers. The friendships and experiences I have had through VBLS are ones that I am forever grateful for. Even considering all that has happened, I cannot imagine my life had VBLS not been a part of it, nor would I want to. We would frequently refer to the organization metaphorically and appropriately as “the family.” That is exactly what VBLS was to me until April of 2012.

I became a ranking supervisor in 2008. For me, it was a position and opportunity that I am so grateful to have filled for two primary reasons: it expanded my role in the company I loved and

more importantly, I was there to support the lifeguards. It is real honor to provide a safe environment for beach goers to enjoy the beach and the home that I am so lucky to have grown up with. And this may sound crazy to some people, but it is really exciting and fun to work such a crowded beach that responds to an extraordinarily high number of incidents. It would be hard to guess how many rescues I have been on over my years as I sometime would even lose track of how many I'd gone on in a single day. The lifeguards all work very hard to do our part in reducing the number of injuries and deaths that occur at the oceanfront; however, not every day has a happy ending. It's knowing how difficult those days are that made my role supporting the lifeguards, which included my closest friends, so meaningful.

I saw very few females work their way into the supervisory ranks. Those that had were treated differently and the one that I even called my "VBLS big sister" got so frustrated watching less qualified men promoted over her that it was no longer worth it to her to continue working for the company she too had grown up with and loved so much. I naively thought they would never do that to me. I thought that because of all the awards I won at lifeguard competitions, the numerous awards I received from my performance on various rescues, and how much I had continuously gone above and beyond to show my commitment and love for the job that I couldn't possibly be overlooked.

I was wrong.

Is it difficult to work for men that you think are discriminating against you based on your gender? Yes. Is it upsetting? No, actually it's *really* upsetting. Regardless of how many times I felt I had proved my worth, it continued to be challenged and my value continued to be rejected. A fellow male supervisor even suggested to me that perhaps because I had been there for so many years and won so many awards that in the minds of the men in charge, they all had just blurred together and been forgotten. Another told me, that maybe our grandkids would live in a world where women weren't seen differently but that just wasn't our reality. Nevertheless, my motivation to work there was never to have the top guys give me pat on the back. And frankly, good ole boys' perceptions of me are not something I've ever been inclined to care about. The reason I worked for VBLS was because of my passion for the work they do, to allow people to safely enjoy the home and ocean I love so much, and to be there when my friends and my fellow lifeguards needed help.

I remember on what ended up being my last day in the final minutes working on the beach in 2011, the most lovable and good intending of the higher ranking men, told me if I was coming back next summer that he hoped to my rank change. I jokingly told him that I'd be back but I had two X chromosomes, and that wasn't changing.

The next spring, at the first supervisor meeting of the year, 11 men were promoted. It felt like they had promoted everyone who they could have promoted, except me. It felt flagrant. It was as if because I had complained about men getting promoted and been out spoken that I felt the females supervisors were being treated differently, that I had been denied promotion. I went home that night and decided my options were: quit, be upset, or do something. Choosing quit or choosing to be upset would just pass the burden along; I would make it someone else's problem. I googled what to do, found the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, EEOC, went to Norfolk, and filed a charge.

Around the same time when VBLS would have received the EEOC charge, I was removed from all the mailing lists. Every time I heard an email had been sent out, I sent an email trying to figure out why I was off the list and requested the information. My emails were never responded to until on April 13, 2012 I was sent an email to notify me that I had been fired for various reasons including but not limited to "lack of interest and enthusiasm."

I only wanted mediation. I only wanted VBLS to develop performance reviews. I only wanted VBLS to conduct official evaluations. I only wanted actual standards and criteria for promotions developed. And I was fired for *that*. That email, while shocking and completely devastating, reaffirmed the caliber of men I was dealing with and reaffirmed that this was not a burden I could allow anyone else to take. I wanted to be the last employee they would treat that way.

I needed to find an attorney, someone who was really there for me. I found that and so much more. My attorneys, Lisa Bertini and Courtney Williams, have been there for me in every possible way. It's humbling that these women believed in me, my case, and my cause so deeply that they are willing to fight so hard and sacrifice so much purely for the principle and not the money.

I have further been humbled by the actions of a friend. We initially bonded over our frustrations with the unequal treatment we received. Prior to my lawsuit, I would describe us as friends. Today I have the privilege to call her one of the best friends I will ever have. It's not every day you find a friend who is willing to put herself in the line of fire and risk receiving the same retaliation and betrayals that you experienced just for telling the truth. Albert Einstein famously said, "The world is a dangerous place. Not because of people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." Her moral compass was too strong to let her look on and do nothing. The silence of friends sting more than the words of adversaries; however, finding out what a friend I had in her has made it worth it a million times over. She was my only witness.

This past week, twelve strangers were by chance a part of my life. Twelve strangers that probably did not want to be there, twelve strangers that I will probably never meet again, twelve strangers that were provided a limited version of my story and even more limited evidence to support it, and is it to twelve strangers I am forever grateful. I wish I could individually thank every member of the jury for making justice possible. While my case may seem to be minute, the message is great: we can't allow ourselves to fear the fight or lose faith in our ability to make change happen.

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