



with Denice Rice

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STAFF WRITER

DENICE RICE faced sexual assault from a supervisor when she worked in California's Eldorado National Forest as a United States Forest Service (USFS) firefighter in 2009. His abuse, which lasted almost two years, included circling one of her nipples with the pointed end of a letter opener. The supervisor retired with full benefits before an investigation into his abuse finished. The USFS suppressed and retaliated against sexual harassment and abuse survivors, according to investigations conducted by Outside Online and PBS in 2018. Now, almost eight years after Rice filed her first Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint, she's testified in front of Congress and had her story splashed across multiple publications. I spoke with Rice in fall 2018, a few months after she was reassigned as forest fire prevention battalion chief. This is the job she was removed from by her harasser and supervisor:

Do you feel like the USFS and your co-workers want you to succeed in keeping your job?

Some people support me, but not everyone. I fought so hard to get my job back. They just want to see me fail because I made them look bad. The upper management did everything within their power to keep me from getting the job, and I still got the job.

Do you feel like you have won some of this battle against the retaliation you faced for coming out publicly?

I don't look at it as a winning thing. It cost me an awful lot. The last eight years destroyed me. It's taken a long time. I kept fighting because I didn't want them to win.

Can you describe what you faced after coming forward about the sexual harassment you endured while in the forest service and why?

I lost my dignity, my respect and my reputation because of coming forward and fighting. The publicity was embarrassing.

I don't let people talk to me about the articles or the PBS NewsHour. I've never seen or read an article that I have been interviewed for. I just don't watch it

because it's embarrassing, because I am that person. I never wanted to be that person.

Has the #MeToo movement changed anything in the USFS?

I know that a lot of people are coming forward now. It's gone from nothing to an inundation. I don't think there is a woman out there, or man, that goes through this if it didn't happen because people are always like, "she asked for it," or "they're making it up," or "making a bigger deal out of it." I'm not making a bigger deal out of it. I never did.

Has anything improved since the Outside Online or PBS investigations? I've seen that people are standing up more for each other and supporting each other more. They're not tolerating the abuse. I have not seen any structural changes within the USFS. I have to support people.



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because nobody does this, not even our union.

Have you received any forms of compensation or any recognition or apology for what happened?

I never got anything. Not even, "I'm sorry this happened to you."

Why does this issue of women or men facing sexual harassment in the USFS matter?

It matters because it is not acceptable. It is about accountability. It's always been about accountability, to me. There is no accountability. The forest service still hasn't admitted there is a problem. They did not even admit it when the PBS investigation came out. The chief of the Forest Service sent out an email regarding these "alleged" incidents—never once addressing the potential that they could possibly, maybe, be true. How would that make you feel? Nobody in upper management has ever reached out to any of the victims.

Why does acknowledgment matter? What would an apology mean to you?

I was told that the [USFS] will never admit guilt. And I have yet to see it. I couldn't even imagine an apology. It would validate what happened, that I wasn't crazy, that I wasn't making it up. It would be everything. But it won't happen. I would never expect it to happen.

What do you hope for in the future?

To be honest with you, I want to get my program reestablished, and I just want out. I am done fighting. I hope that things change. I'll try to get something started, and then have somebody younger and smarter and stronger come in and take it from there.

Do you mean someone like who you were before the harassment began? I am not that person. That person doesn't exist anymore, unfortunately. Unfortunately, I will never be that person again. ■



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