

Newsday

THE LONG ISLAND NEWSPAPER

www.newsday.com

WEDNESDAY, AUG. 8, 2001 • NASSAU

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Town Safety Officer Awarded \$175,000 in Sex-Bias Lawsuit

By Robert E. Kessler

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A public safety officer for the Town of Hempstead was awarded \$175,000 in damages yesterday by a federal jury, which found that the town had discriminated against her because of her gender.

Laura Jackson, 53, had sued the town in U.S. District Court in Central Islip, claiming that since she had begun working for the town in 1990 male public safety officers were given better shifts, better patrol cars and better locker accommodations.

"I don't think that they thought I was really serious about it," said Jackson after the verdict was announced. "[The town] took it as a joke. But I'm not somebody sitting back and taking it." She added that she hoped the verdict would help end job discrimination against women.

"This is an extraordinarily important verdict . . . that sounds a clear message that discrimination in any form should not be tolerated," said Jackson's attorney, Fred Brewington of Hempstead. Brewington said Jackson is the only regular full-time female public safety officer employed by the town.

John Ryan of Floral Park, the attorney for the town, said he would ask U.S. District Judge Frederic Block to either overturn the verdict on the grounds that it was not supported by the evidence or to sharply reduce the amount of the award.

Among other things, Jackson said that while men had a separate locker room, she was told to change into uniform in a women's bathroom and was given a locker in a public hallway or told to tote her street clothes around in a gym bag. The town eventually provided her with a women's locker room in 1996.

Jackson also complained in 1996 that the town humiliated her when she had volunteered to be a model for a breast-examination video. She had said that despite her face being digitally masked, she was mentioned in the credits and became an object of ridicule among her co-workers because of her participation.

The town eventually withdrew the video and re-shot it with a professional model.

But Brewington said Jackson had dropped the part of her initial suit that involved the video because she did not want to profit from what she had undertaken as a public service.