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## Los Angeles News

Dec 28, 2007 8:26 pm US/Pacific [Digg](#) | [Facebook](#) | [E-mail](#) | [Print](#)

### Ex-Firefighter Awarded \$1.17M In Forced Retirement

#### Black Ex-Firefighter Claims Retirement Was After Complaining About Harassment, Hazing

LOS ANGELES (CBS) — A black former Pasadena firefighter was wrongfully forced into disability retirement after complaining about harassment and hazing by colleagues, a jury found Friday in awarding him \$1.17 million.

A racially mixed Los Angeles Superior Court panel of eight women and four men, including a black female, deliberated for less than half a day before finding in favor of Carter Stephens.

A noticeably moved Stephens nodded and smiled at jurors as he heard the verdict. He later shook hands with each of them as they left the courtroom.

Stephens sued in November 2006 for wrongful termination and discrimination. According to the lawsuit, supervisors and co-workers harassed Stephens by leaving blood, urine, and feces on his bedding, putting mucous on his uniform and scrawling a swastika on his firefighter hood.

In 2001, Stephens worked at a station where he overheard another captain refer to him by the "N" word, according to his suit.

Stephens had joined the department in 1987 and the Pasadena Fire and Police Retirement Board approved his disability retirement against his wishes in February 2005, according to his court papers.

"I'm extremely happy," Stephens said later outside the courtroom. "A million bucks, I can start putting my life back together, I can go back to school."

Stephens testified during the trial that he has worked low-paying jobs since being retired, including a stint as a shoe salesman at Macy's.

Brent S. Buchsbaum, one of Stephens' lawyers, said that although Stephens was the victim of racial discrimination, the focus of his suit was on the retaliation he believed he suffered after complaining about the pranks and other actions against him.

Assistant City Attorney Hugh A. Halford said he was disappointed with the verdict and that it would be appealed. He declined further comment, but said during final arguments Thursday that the 55-year-old Stephens was out for cash, not justice.

In 2000 and 2001, Stephens underwent therapy for stress he experienced on the job because of the alleged harassment, the lawsuit stated.

Stephens injured his knee in June 2002, but his doctor told him the following year he was fit to return to work, according to the lawsuit.

However, a city doctor in April 2004 declared Stephens "unfit for duty at this time" and the city prepared a disability retirement application for him, according to the lawsuit.

According to Buchsbaum, the finding was not supported by any facts and was used by the city as justification for retiring Stephens.

Juror Louis Ceballos, a 57-year-old nightclub disc jockey from Glendale, said he initially decided to vote in favor of Stephens. He said he then reconsidered for a while because none of Stephens' bedding or clothing was brought into the courtroom, nor were there any photographs.

However, Ceballos said he eventually returned to his original position in favor of

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Stephens, in large part because of he believed the city's human resources director, Karyn Ezell, did not properly investigate his complaints.

"She should have taken him under her wing and found out what was going on," Ceballos said.

Ceballos said the jury was not swayed by and never talked about ne-s accounts of hazing and retaliation against other firefighters, including that of Tennie Pierce. Pierce claimed his Los Angeles Fire Department colleagues at the Westchester station fed him dog food.

Pierce sued the city of Los Angeles and later settled for \$1.43 million. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa vetoed an earlier \$2.7 million accord after seeing photographs of Pierce participating in hazing incidents himself.

Ceballos said that unlike Pierce, Stephens did not pull pranks on other firefighters.  
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