

Week 3 Assignment

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In October of 1998, Cathy Harris, Senior Inspector for the Department of US Customs (USCS), blew the whistle on the unfair, demeaning, and racist practices she witnessed while working for this agency. A 20-year veteran in the position, she had built a career in ensuring the safe passage of hundreds of thousands of people entering the US each day. Much of this entailed; inspecting passports and other traveling documents required, but also on occasion detaining and reporting persons she flagged for suspicious activity. Cathy worked in major cities such as El Paso, Texas; Miami, Florida; and Atlanta, Georgia throughout her 20-year tenure. However, no matter where she was, she notice common themes in the persons being questioned or detained. Cathy has testified to witness on numerous occasions where women of color were being targeted and subject to unlawful searches. In some case handcuffed to benches for hours while pregnant. She tells stories of women refusing advances from male inspectors and in return being punished. As a result of all that she had witnessed, Cathy decided to expose the racial and sexist practices being carried out by members of the US Customs.

Although Cathy publicly came forward in 1998, she had already started blowing the whistle in 1997 by making the decision that enough was enough and something had to be done. So, Cathy reached out to local news outlets to share her story and experience. As a result of coming forward, Cathy experience much backlash that would result in filing 10 EEOC complaints against the agency. Cathy would ultimately be forced to go on a 15-month unpaid stress leave but returned after a successful lawsuit in response to her leave.

Cathy was a very successful whistleblower and was able to help pass “The Civil Rights Travelers Act” and the “Reasonable Search Act” which would always impact other laws and more importantly best practices by the department of US customs. Another outcome of Cathy’s whistleblowing was a very public governmental investigation on the matters raised by Cathy.

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This would also be used as part of the bases for the creation of the “No Fear Act”, introduced to hold government agencies more accountable for their practices. Much of her success she notes was connected to the relationship she built with media outlets. She said she learned very early on that the media would be a saving grace to her.

I think Cathy Harris is a hero in many ways, I am sure it is scary going up against the federal government. However, it was through her voice that she gave voice to the thousands of women who were being violated during their travels. Furthermore, I think it is especially hard for women and more specifically women of color to speak out and feel heard in the face of whistleblowing. I read that one of the investigations reported that out of all the detained and searched women, only 3% actually were smuggling drugs into the United States. This makes me angry that grown men would use their power to subject women to this treatment just because they will not provide them with their telephone numbers. I am glad she spoke out and blew the whistle.

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References

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