

1 November 2006

LIVES ON HOLD BY CONTROVERSIAL PRINT CASE

"I FOUND I WAS FACING SACK AFTER 39YRS AS A FINGERPRINTS EXPERT WHEN MY SON READ IT IN PAPER"

By Annie Brown

FINGERPRINT expert Robert Mackenzie found out he was facing the sack when his son read it in a newspaper.

The deputy head of the Glasgow office of the fingerprints service was on holiday when his son Scott called to break the news.

Mackenzie, 58, is one of the experts at the centre of the Shirley McKie case.

They have kept silent during the lengthy and controversial case. But today, they break their silence through their families.

Earlier this year, former detective McKie won £750,000 in an out-of-court settlement.

Mackenzie and colleague Alan Dunbar were asked to verify the work of four subordinates.

The four had identified a fingerprint at a murder scene as being McKie's.

They had originally been called to give evidence at the trial of David Asbury in 1997 for the murder of Marion Ross.

Their evidence was also used against McKie after she was charged with perjury when she denied under oath that the print was hers.

She was cleared by the High Court.

She sued Strathclyde Police and lost but a civil action against the Executive resulted in the £750,000 deal.

Now, all six experts from the Scottish Criminal Record Office's Glasgow office face being forced out the door as a result.

The experts accuse the Executive of throwing in the towel too early in the McKie case and wanted their evidence tested in court.

Scott Mackenzie said: "My father and his colleagues don't consider themselves to be victims.

"Marion Ross was the victim but they do see themselves as having being made scapegoats.

"The way they have been treated is an absolute disgrace and they have been cleared of any wrongdoing time and again."

As yet, not one of the six has officially been approached by their employers, Strathclyde Police, and told to go. But moves to oust them have been made to their union Unison.

Robert has served 39 years with the fingerprint service but has now been told to take early retirement.

Scott said: "My dad is not ready for early retirement. He loves his job. I don't know anyone more honest and dedicated than him. He has been subjected to a malicious, one-sided campaign."

The experts have been through a 13-month police and Crown Office inquiry.

An independent disciplinary panel established none of them had breached any professional guidelines and recommended they should be returned to full duties as soon as possible.

They were reinstated but have not been allowed to give evidence in court.

This was despite the fact the four lower-ranking experts had all their work for one year before the McKie case and one year after it quality checked by a team from New Scotland Yard.

Their work was found to be 100 per cent accurate.

The Scottish parliament's justice committee set up a special inquiry to investigate the fingerprint service in the hope it could restore public confidence after the McKie fiasco.

Their report is due this month.

But on the last day of evidence, David Mulhearn, interim head of the Scottish Police Services Authority, who take over the SFS in April, put exit packages on the table for all six experts.

Eight days before, Mulhearn admitted to BBC's Newsnight programme that they had done nothing wrong.

He also told the justice committee the experts had been badly treated and unsupported by management and commended their dignity throughout the saga.

Scott said: "My father doesn't criticise and bad-mouth. He isn't someone who shouts, but the way he has been treated has definitely hurt him badly. After 39 years, his employers haven't had the decency to speak to him directly about losing his job."

One of the four lower ranking experts, Anthony McKenna, has been offered a year's salary to go. But after 29 years in the service he is desperate to stay put.

His sister Siobhan said: "If he was to leave, what would he do? Fingerprints have been his life.

"Anthony is married with two children who both have special needs and is conscious that he will have to care for them well into adulthood.

"Tony is a quiet, genuine man who lives for his family. He dotes on his children.

"He puts a brave face on it for his kids but he has been in pieces at some points over this."

This week, Unison wrote to all their members in Scotland's police offices calling on their support for the experts.

Regional officer Ann Russell said: "It is outrageous that, in the middle of a parliamentary inquiry, and when every investigation has cleared them of wrongdoing, they are being harassed in this manner by a senior police officer."

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Please Note:

This article repeats the fiction that the '**Black Enquiry**' was independent.

*'An **independent disciplinary** panel established none of them had breached any professional guidelines and recommended they should be returned to full duties as soon as possible.'*

James Black was a non-expert headhunted by the SCRO lawyers and was appointed by SCRO management, the experts, and their Union Unison. This is not independent.

If this information is incorrect please let me know and I will publish any response on this website.

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