

Fired Doctor: Was She A Millstone?

Bee Photo by Dick Schmidt



Dr. Josette Mondanaro: Fired by Gov. Brown.

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He is a butcher in New York, a shop steward for his union, the son of Italian immigrants, the father of four sons and a daughter. His formal education stopped at the ninth grade.

His wife, also the child of immigrants, works in a New York department store. Before that, she stayed home with the four sons and the daughter.

It's two days before Thanksgiving, and the daughter — at age 32, a nationally respected physician and expert in treating drug addicts — is home for the holidays. She lives in California, where she has just been fired on orders of Gov. Brown from her important government job.

Her father remembers meeting the governor of California at a Lake Tahoe conference of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union where Jerry Brown and the butcher's daughter were guest speakers.

When he was introduced to the governor, the butcher remembers him saying: "You should be proud of the wonderful job that your daughter is doing."

And now his daughter has been fired from the job which the governor told her father she did so well. He decides to write and ask why.

"My name is Anthony Mondanaro," he begins his letter to the governor, "the proud father of Dr. Josette Mondanaro . . . My wife and I have four other children; two are teachers, one is a computer analyst and the last is still in college . . .

"Our daughter Josette has dedicated her life to serving humanity

with all its trials and tribulations. Regardless of her own life style, she has met many challenges head on, never wavering, always ready to help the needy."

It is a difficult letter for him to write. He is depressed, angry. But he has basic respect for authority, and he has heard the young governor of California is concerned about ordinary people.

He asks the governor to reconsider his decision to fire Dr. Mondanaro — ostensibly for writing an angry personal letter, on state stationery, about child pornography. Ostensibly, because she says in her appeal to the State Personnel Board that the governor fired her for political reasons.

She is a lesbian and believes Brown and his close associates see her as a political liability in the governor's future aspirations to public office. A preliminary hearing on the appeal is scheduled Monday, and her attorney is expected to ask that Gov. Brown, his top aides and high state health officials be subpoenaed to testify. Her immediate superiors in the health department are expected to say, among other things, that they opposed her firing and that the decision to dismiss her was Brown's.

"Must you personally see what Josette has seen in hospital emergency rooms before you could understand her anger and outrage against those who try to minimize the effects of sexual abuse of children?" the butcher asked the governor.

Josette Mondanaro is sitting in the dining room of a friend's apartment, the table in front of her covered with

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papers — legal documents, letters of support, a state job performance report with "outstanding" checked in all the boxes.

"I never looked for this job," she is saying. "I was offered the job by (state health director Dr. Jerome) Lackner and originally turned it down. He told me he wanted to clean up the drug programs . . . I think I did a more than adequate job. I think I did the best job that's ever been done."

Dr. Mondanaro was hired by Lackner in mid-1976 to direct the health department's controversial division of substance abuse, which annually administers more than \$30 million in state and federal money for treatment of drug addicts. A pediatrician by training, she is nationally known as an expert on drug and alcohol addiction and is a specialist in the effects of drug abuse on pregnant women and their children.

Her professional credentials are extensive and varied, with emphasis on clinic and consulting work for health programs aimed at poor and

'Our daughter Josette has devoted her life to serving humanity.'

disadvantaged people.

"I sought her out for the job because she has an incredible reputation," Lackner said. "She is an exceptionally talented, capable manager, a sensitive and competent professional."

"I opposed her termination, as did her immediate supervisor, Mr. (Ray) Procnier (chief deputy director of the health department). Discipline, yes, but not termination."

Dr. Mondanaro said she was offered the job by Lackner in March 1976, but didn't come to work until July because of resistance to her hiring by administrators in the state Health and Welfare Agency, which oversees the health department.

She believes her lesbianism "was surely a factor" in the hiring delay.

"I was told by Dr. Lackner that Mario Obledo (the agency secretary) was concerned that my hiring would hurt the governor," she said. "Lackner's position was, let the governor decide."

"Lackner kept fighting to get me hired, and finally I had an interview with Carlotta Mellon (Gov. Brown's appointments secretary) in April or May of 1976. She spent 20 minutes on the drug issue and told me, 'You obviously know about that; now let's talk about the gay issue.'"

Gov. Brown has said he will not permit questions about a prospective

appointee's personal life during such interviews. "I'm not interested in people's private lives, and I made that very clear to those people who hire and fire," he said in a recent response to questions about Dr. Mondanaro's Oct. 26 dismissal.

Neither the governor nor his staff would comment specifically on that apparent departure from policy because Dr. Mondanaro's dismissal is on appeal. But Gray Davis, the governor's chief of staff, said in a telephone interview that "we consider

'You must see what she has seen (to) understand outrage.'

only those personal characteristics relevant to the performance of the job" in interviewing prospective appointees.

He insists Dr. Mondanaro was fired solely because of the letter, "which we believe fell well below the standards of propriety we expect of a state official."

Dr. Mondanaro said she welcomed Dr. Mellon's question during the interview, that she appreciated her "bringing it out in the open."

After the interview, Dr. Mondanaro said the appointments secretary left the room with Lackner, and the two spoke privately with Davis. After that

discussion, Dr. Mondanaro said she was told by Dr. Mellon "that basically they had to hire the most qualified person, and I was that person."

Nonetheless, she said, "time passed, the California (presidential) primary was held, and Lackner kept saying, not yet, not yet. He said the problem was that Mario (Obledo) didn't want to hire me."

"I never knew whether it was the governor's fear (of the lesbian issue) or the people around him. At the time, I gave the governor the benefit of the doubt.

"In June, I was interviewed by Mario Obledo. He gave me three minutes of his time after I had been through four months of hell — all because he was upset about the homosexuality.

"He looked at my curriculum vitae (her resume) and said, 'The reason I asked you to come today is because I just wanted to see the outstanding person who went with this curriculum vitae. I didn't know we had anyone in California with your talents.'

"He didn't ask me anything about my qualifications or talk about the gay issue. He mainly talked about himself. I thought that was the end of it, that I would be hired. Then a couple of days later, Lackner told me Obledo said they weren't going to hire me because I might hurt the governor's bid for the presidency.

"So it went back to the governor's office. I understand he finally approved it."

Lackner would not discuss details of the hiring process pending Dr. Mondanaro's appeal. However, state health department sources say there was pressure against her hiring from the agency level — one said "above the agency," presumably the governor's office.

In an interview with The Bee, Obledo denied that he was concerned about Dr. Mondanaro's homosexuality. He would not discuss the matter further because of the appeal.

Dr. Mondanaro took over as head of the substance abuse division in July 1976. Her tenure there was

her staff. Significantly, many of those who were known to criticize her operation of the division will not comment; some have reportedly left the division. Those critics who would

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discuss her tenure were emphatic that their names not be used.

Several of those anonymous critics said she was "insensitive" to staff, favored programs which aided women and circumvented civil ser-

Brown: "I'm not interested in people's private lives."

vice rules to hire her friends and associates — allegations denied by other staff members and by Dr. Mondanaro herself.

Dr. Mondanaro's ongoing disputes with officials of the Health and Welfare Agency are well-known, although neither Obledo nor his top aide, Dr. Xavier Mena, will discuss them. She says she ran afoul of Obledo's and Mena's wishes in program funding and personnel matters, particularly when she refused to hire an Obledo acquaintance, Henry Collins, in a substance abuse position.

In her appeal to the personnel board, Dr. Mondanaro said she had refused as director of the division to take certain unspecified actions "required of her by individuals instrumental in her rejection" — an apparent reference to her problems with the agency heads.

"There was constant harassment from the agency," she said. "I fought them all along, and they couldn't get me professionally, so they had to resort to other means. I might have written an obscene letter, but there are all kinds of obscenities going on that are now going to come out.

"They have messed with the wrong lady."

Dr. Mondanaro apparently had no such problems with health department administrators. Lackner's support of her is commonly known, as is that of his chief administrator, Ray Procnier. Although the latter makes a point of never commenting on personnel matters, it is his signature that appears on her June 26, 1977, job performance report.

In all nine performance categories, Procnier checked "outstanding."

Objections to her firing have been legion, and numerous protest letters have been sent to the governor by people concerned with the problems of drug addicts, women, minorities and the disabled.

Several have charged the governor with political manipulation of drug abuse issues and insensitivity to the needs of addicts and other disadvantaged people.

"Her dismissal must be understood in the context of the Brown administration's abysmal record of neglect on drug abuse prevention," said a statement from the Association of County Drug Program Coordinators.

Dr. Mondanaro gets high marks from other drug abuse professionals for her operation of the division.

"We had problems with California in the past," said Robbie Robertson, who oversees \$180 million in community-aimed federal drug treatment money for the National Institute for Drug Abuse in Washington, D.C. "Prior to her coming there, we were having serious reservations about California's management of the federal contract (about \$16 million to California drug programs).

"She did a great job, and we never worried about her operation."

Glenn Smutz, who oversees federal funding for drug programs in 11 western states out of NIDA's Los Angeles office, said Dr. Mondanaro "represented to us for the first time someone who had a clinical understanding of drug abuse that the previous directors did not have . . .

Obledo denies he was concerned over homosexuality issue

"She admitted there were problems, which other previous managers would not admit, and she let us help. As a result, there was a complete reworking of the division."

Dr. Mondanaro said her "reworking" of the division was met with resistance from some staff.

"I'm a really demanding administrator," she said. "There is a certain quality of work that I expect. I certainly never asked people to work as long as I worked."

"One of the major problems in the division when I took over was a lack of people with drug abuse experience, or former addicts. And there were some people, quite frankly, who resisted my efforts to make them work a seven-hour day."

She said she hired people with expertise in the drug abuse field and substantially improved the representation of women, minorities, ex-addicts and the disabled in the division. Her statements are statistically supported by Patsy Nelson, the division's affirmative action coordinator during Dr. Mondanaro's tenure.

Some of her strongest support comes from former addicts and their

Former addicts, families rally to her support

families. One woman, the mother of a recovered addict and alcoholic counseled by Dr. Mondanaro in San Francisco, sent a \$10 check to help with legal fees (which Dr. Mondanaro expects to run \$5,000 by the time the personnel board rules on her appeal).

Intense, prodigiously active, Josette Mondanaro can exhaust people by her mere presence. She sleeps only six hours a night — "less if I'm working hard."

She worked all through college and medical school — as a swim instructor, a research technician, a waitress — to supplement her scholarships and what financial help her parents could provide. With six kids to put through college — on the salaries of a butcher and a department store salesperson — the Mondanaro family budget was a hard reality.

"The main attitudes we grew up with, the main values, had to do with honor and humor. Through all of this hassle over my firing, I think about a story my father used to tell when I was little and we were living in Flushing.

"My father worked for a store that wanted him to pour blood on old meat to make it look better. He refused. They couldn't fire him because he was a shop steward of his union, so they transferred him to another shop where he had to commute an hour each way . . .

"The understanding that politicians are corrupt is something I grew up with. Collusion is a word I learned early."