

# Firing of Wood Burns Hot in Town Hall

## Key Opinion

By Stephen Reid  
Editor and Publisher



After studying the transcript of the April Wood termination hearing, and after studying the attorney bills that give real meaning to the expression "time is money," one walks away baffled, angry, confused and suspicious.

Why was Human Resource Manager April Wood, after years of exemplary service, fired by Longboat Key's new Town Clerk, Jane O'Connor? Was the firing justified? Were the reasons O'Connor made in the termination letter sufficient, or were they the best that O'Connor's attorney, paid by the Town, could scrape together to justify such an action.

What becomes most apparent when reading the transcript of the termination hearing is that Wood and O'Connor had little fondness for each other. There was a pettiness that permeated the entire proceedings.

After all, Wood applied to the Town for one of the jobs O'Connor eventually assumed. There is a sentiment among Town Staff and former employees that O'Connor lacks many of the skills necessary to perform her job. There have been complaints that requests for pension disbursements are not answered and calls are rarely returned. There seems to be consensus that O'Connor is learning on the job. She also brings baggage of being directly involved in a legal mess in the City of Venice.

Also, Wood did herself little favor by approaching Town Manager Bruce St. Denis to complain about O'Connor and telling him that O'Connor needed to start pulling her own weight and stop running the department solely through delegation.

### Ready, Fire, Aim

St. Denis took the unsurprisingly clichéd response by standing up for his new hire and Wood's superior, O'Connor. It becomes quite clear that O'Connor apparently was gunning for Wood from that day forward.

Now, of course, the record and the attorneys will prettify what seems like an overly simplistic interpretation. But the bottom line is these were two valuable employees — one long-standing and evidently a top performer, and the other, O'Connor, a superior in position who was given tremendous responsibility by the Town Manager. If St. Denis, instead of removing himself from this tiny Town Hall soap opera, had played a reconcilia-

tory and diplomatic role, much of this could have been averted and Wood's job could have been saved with finesse.

Wood has said that what propels her in her cause and why she is so adamant in fighting for her job is that she feels betrayed by St. Denis.

The Town attorney fees alone exceed Wood's compensation for an entire year of employment. Add to that the time and energy Fire Chief Julius Halas, Planning Zoning and Building Director Monica Daigle, Kathi Pletzki, Terry Sullivan, former Police Chief John Kintz, St. Denis and many others have had to expend in preparation and sitting through hours of testimony in the hearings. The cost in focus and attention by employees alone is staggering.

If Wood is successful and her position is reinstated due to a lack of cause, the Town will be required to pay her attorney bills as well, which already exceed \$20,000.

One of the charges is that Wood did not make it clear she had been arrested for DUI on her job application. Wood says that at the time, when she was 26 years old, she thought the DUI constituted a traffic violation, and the form said not to include traffic violations. But the DUI was no secret to anyone in Town Hall, nor to St. Denis who hired her.

O'Connor chose to include Wood's failure to list the DUI on the application seven years ago as part of the grounds for termination. Town staffers, residents and even commissioners say this was a smear job and cheap shot on O'Connor's part.

Adding to the dilemma is former Police Chief John Kintz's testimony in the hearing that he had personally

told St. Denis that Wood had been convicted of DUI and that St. Denis acknowledged that fact and was agreeable to the hire six years ago.

But these are just details. Unfortunately for the Town, the case against Wood is remarkably thin. Strangely, St. Denis is the decider in the hearing, and refused to recuse himself when Wood's attorney, Bob Turff's requested. Ironically it is St. Denis who was the only one who could have intervened six months in what appears to be a fairly common office skirmish.

As one commissioner suggested: "The new boss (O'Connor) wanted to make her mark."

But there was no buildup before the denouement, no written reprimands, no clarity to Wood of O'Connor's disfavor. Remember, the case against Wood is tenuous — O'Connor never gave her a written warning or written reprimand. According to the testimony, O'Connor said she sent Wood emails, although none have been substantiated or produced.

As any private sector employer knows, to protect a company, the method is to document, document and then document again all issues, complains, consequences to an employee you are thinking of firing.

### What to Do?

It is a sad day in Town Hall. If St. Denis stands behind O'Connor's decision to terminate Wood and a settlement cannot be reached, Wood vows to take the issue to court. After reading the transcript, which is available in Town Hall, the Town's position seems weak and the Town's exposure is great.

And the bigger questions are the most bothersome. Is there a talent drain happening in Town Hall? Is there a management breakdown that is damaging morale and making the Town a less desirable place to work? And what are the repercussions of having former and current department heads testifying for and against employees?

Let's hope St. Denis can navigate the waters between the Scylla of being loyal to O'Connor and the Charybdis of wasting Town money fighting a tenuous and demoralizing battle. If he can, he might emerge a hero. If not, the Players is auditioning for Captain Queue in the Cain Mutiny next spring.

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## Lia's Corner,

from Page 5A

would seize up. Coming off drugs was hard on his body. In June, he had a seizure and was treated at Doctor's Hospital. He knew he might face life-long problems from his drug-taking years.

Because Sierra had always worked in his father's business, he had to find a job with someone else, and he would have to do it without transportation or tools.

His family stood by offering him a sofa, food or a listening heart, phone calls, love, and encouragement. But, they knew that thing called "tough love" was in order. He had to take the steps himself.

Sierra worked his way up the chain on construction jobs. Eventually, he was able to afford his own place to live. His last employer hired him in spite of not having tools or transportation. He valued Sierra's work that much.

He put on weight, found a certain kind of peace, and talked about his dreams to go back to college and be a success one day.

Sierra was also writing again. He was a poet. And, of course, was working on Shiloh's screenplay Justice.

The Saturday night before his death, there was a party. The facts are only partially known. We know he was drinking, and maybe taking cold medicine for he had been sick with a virus the week before. Every day he took his anxiety medication. We know there were narcotics available. Soon, we will know why he died. But, one thing we do know is that the combination of whatever he was taking that night as he partied caused his death. He overdosed.

Medical examiners say he could have died from a bad combination of alcohol and medication. If he did use drugs, his death would be hard to prevent. People in the business know that prior users often face death if they try to use again.

Sierra never planned to die that night. Everything he

## Song of Sorrow

By Lia Martin

*Sadness gathers inside my heart  
as if resting on the beating wings of an eagle.  
There is a sound like doves cooing looking for escape  
How do I write the words to this song of sorrow?*

*With blood dripping from my veins, I write this song.  
With solemn words and orgies of tears, I write this song.  
My knees collapse to the earth and my forehead dips so low  
that my lips brush this holy ground in remorse.*

*Each day slams into me like bullets leaving holes the size of a barn.  
Pools of blood — dark red and thick — trickle slowly to the earth  
in this strange landscape I have come to call my own.  
The snow melts upon the mountains, a ritual of Spring...*

*Buds on trees seek release as they remember when as blossoms  
they fell to the ground in handfuls, in sweet relief.  
There is only a remembrance of love now like the full sounds of strings:  
violins playing in the lonely deep of the night, so quiet the sound on the earth.*



had fought for would have been for nothing. He would have disappointed his family. As a sensitive young man, Sierra would have hated to cause any more hurt.

But, he abused his body. He didn't respect it. He did not learn the lessons of self-preservation. Sierra allowed himself to die.

My son died Saturday night or Sunday morning, lying unconscious on his bed. There were people there, who could have helped him — who could have phoned 911.

It was left for me to find him on Sunday afternoon, to run for help, to call for help.

This had been my worst fear since Shiloh's death — my worst nightmare.

On Sunday, friends and family gathered for a celebration of Sierra's life, and to mourn his death. Many of these mourners had also been in attendance at Shiloh's memorial, and at their father Michael's memorial this year.

It was up to me to give them solace and closure.

At my home, overlooking Robert's Bay on Siesta Key, we held our memorial to my son. Sierra loved it there, and spent many peaceful weekends there with us. We will scatter his ashes on the water off the north end of Siesta Key beach to rest with his brother and his father.

We pray he will find peace at last. And, we will go on and live — for life is for the living.