

Update: Nassau Must Pay Morgenstern \$1.8 M

Federal jury finds worker wrongfully terminated after explosive trial; taxpayers on the hook

 Written by [Christopher Twarowski](#) on Aug 13th, 2009 and filed under [L.I. News](#), [News](#).



Georgina Morgenstern was fired six years ago from Nassau County. Last week, a federal jury awarded her \$1.8 million, saying she was wrongfully terminated. Photo by Ethan Stokes

Federal jurors in Central Islip awarded former Nassau County Planning Department Employee Georgina Morgenstern \$1.8 million in a wrongful termination suit that included allegations of illegal fundraising and retaliation by the county and a handful of its top employees.

Morgenstern alleged that county resources and personnel were being used for non-county purposes, such as fundraising for Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi, and that she was fired in retaliation for blowing the whistle on the practices, without due process.

The jury found that Morgenstern's due process rights as a permanent employee had been violated when she was terminated on Dec. 5, 2003. Jurors also found that three defendants—former Chief Deputy County Executive Anthony Cancellieri, former Director of Planning Patricia Bourne and former Human Resources Director John Donnelly—were directly involved in that violation.

The jury dismissed Morgenstern's First Amendment rights violation and retaliation claims, finding that only Bourne knew of Morgenstern's complaints.

Morgenstern was awarded \$1.5 million for emotional distress and \$100,000 in punitive damages against each of the three defendants. Economic damages and attorney fees will total more than \$5 million, says Douglas Wigdor of Thompson Wigdor & Gilly LLP, co-counsel for Morgenstern.

“[Morgenstern] feels vindicated, in that she never should have been shown the door in such an expedited fashion,” said Wigdor. “She should have been able to challenge the termination through a hearing, through advanced notice.”

The jury’s Aug. 7 findings came a day after the *Press* published a cover story about Morgenstern and her mammoth claims [[“Skeletons In The Closet,” Aug. 6, 2009](#)], and more than five years after the suit’s original filing in January 2004, also the subject of a *Press* cover story [[“The Whistleblower,” May 26, 2005](#)].

Until the jury’s award, the *Press* had been the only media outlet reporting on the case.

A detailed request for comment from the Nassau County Attorney’s Office went unanswered as of press time.