

Listening again to miner Lois Jenson

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It's time to listen to Lois Jenson

- again. Jenson is the heroic former Iron Range miner whose experiences are described in the recent movie, "North Country," and the book, Class Action, on which the movie is based. Over the last 20 years Jenson challenged companies on sexual harassment. Now she's questioning how the legal system deals with these issues. Sometimes victims of assault are treated almost as badly in the court system as they were during the original crime.

It's not possible, in this newspaper, to fully describe many things that Jenson and other women experienced at Eveleth Mine. Sexual harassment included physical and mental assault. Extremely crude, degrading signs and pictures appeared through the mine and buildings. There were many comments about the women's bodies, and what some men wanted to do to them. Women were told repeatedly that they did not belong in the mine.

Sometimes harassment was more physical. While not all men participated, some grabbed the women, touching "private parts." In the mine pit, there were no restrooms, so men traditionally relieved themselves on or near huge trucks they drove. Understandably women didn't want to do this.

It took months before a portable restroom was provided. Several men knocked it over while a woman was inside. This was not just extremely degrading. Portable toilet chemicals burned her.

Seeing the movie, and reading Class Action makes me wonder, "Why didn't supervisors and owners intervene? Why didn't the union demand changes?" Clearly, Jenson and some other women complained.

But, it took more than a decade of lawsuits before the mine owners created, and began enforcing a sexual harassment policy. Authors Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler concluded:

"Jenson v. Eveleth set many

important precedents."

(Establishing) the liability of Eveleth Mines for maintaining a hostile work environment sent a clear signal to employers that they could no longer look the other way when their employees were being sexually harassed...the most important precedent (certified) the case as a class action...it gave formerly voiceless working women a megaphone with which to demand change and the leverage with which to achieve it.

Jenson and several other Iron Range female miners spoke last weekend in Duluth, thanks to the University of Minnesota Duluth Center for Advocacy. While the women reported improvements, Jenson was very critical of the court system. She and Class Action described vigorous, sometimes vicious efforts by opposing attorneys to invade their privacy and discredit their experiences...in effect, attacking them again and again.

Having helped bring a few students who committed assault to court while a school administrator, I had a tiny taste of what Jenson described. For example, even though a trespassing student whom I had asked several times to leave a school hit me, his attorney attacked and tried to discredit me...the victim. That's what happened, over several years, to Jenson and her colleagues.

Jenson think the court system needs changing. She's right. A system seeking to provide justice sometimes produces a new round of pain and suffering.