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Supporters rally behind 'feminist' professor

BY JESSE BLACK-ALLEN

TORONTO (CUP) — Supporters of a York University teacher who they say was denied tenure because of her strong feminist beliefs have appealed directly to the school's president in an effort to get her reinstated.

Over 2,300 people have signed a petition to York president Lorna Marsden demanding the reinstatement of Nancy Nicol, a teacher in the fine arts department who was denied tenure after teaching at the university for six years. She has not taught at the school for the last two years.

Nicol had been recommended for tenure by the fine arts department, but both the faculty and university senate committees on tenure were against this.

She successfully appealed this at another senate committee, but former York president Susan Mann, who had the final word on the matter, overturned the decision, thus denying Nicol tenure. She was subsequently not offered another teaching position at the university.

Members of the York University Faculty Association

are arguing, on Nicol's behalf, that procedural errors were made throughout the process. They are particularly concerned with the consideration given to anonymous statements in her file.

They say the statements, taken from student evaluation forms, affected the process leading to Nicol's denial of tenure. The association says the use of such statements violates its collective agreement with the university.

The forms included statements like, "Don't shove this feminist garbage down my throat."

Seth Feldman, York's dean of fine arts, says the statements in Nicol's file are not "anonymous," but "confidential" statements.

He says comments were only used insofar as they demonstrated a "disturbing pattern" in Nicol's teaching.

"Let's just say she took her politics to a personal level...and made students feel personally uncomfortable," he said.

When Mann made the final decision against tenure for Nicol, she stated that the teacher had a "narrow ideology" and "did not address a wide audience".

But some of Nicol's former

students say she introduced feminist ideas in the classroom in a way that encouraged open debate.

And Linda Brisken, a professor of women's studies at York, says professors often encounter negative responses from students when they introduce feminist ideas. She adds that the small number of negative comments in Nicol's file should not have been used against her.

Nicol's supporters also say that tenure is specifically intended to benefit professors who work in controversial and unpopular areas.

The case is currently under arbitration, but Nichol's supporters say the matter will take years to resolve unless Marsden agrees to meet with the teacher's representatives outside of arbitration to bring about a speedy resolution.

Letters of support for Nichol from the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and the Ontario Federation of Labor have been sent to Marsden.

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