



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Age Discrimination**

## Age Discrimination

The famous golfer Jack Nicklaus said, “The older you get the stronger the wind gets--- and it’s always in your face.”<sup>1</sup> It’s one thing for the wind to come about naturally. We can do nothing about nature’s whims with its winds and our years. But it’s another thing for this so-called wind to blow in our face regardless of our age. It’s yet another thing for this wind to be willfully placed in our face as an obstacle to living-out our lives productively; a wind borne not by nature, but by fellow humans.

Such is the story I will write here. It is an account of how a competent, educated woman ---seeking employment in an industry that has positions with frequent openings---was denied these jobs because of her age. After studying her personal and professional history, I can come up with no other conclusion.

At the start of this narrative, truth in disclosure: I am writing about a friend and a relative. Thus, I could be criticized for having a bias toward this woman. I believe I do not, but I will let the story unfold and you can decide for yourself.

Beth Duncan is 57 years of age. She is the mother of three children, who are doing their own things and doing well. She lost her husband Doug Duncan to cancer two years ago. Prior to his death, she was working as a lead radiology technologist at a respected medical/imaging center in Southern California. She worked at this facility for four years. Her evaluations were always commendable. In her file is a letter of commendation from her supervisor praising her performance and dependability.

Had she desired, Beth could have led a comfortable life into her retirement years working as an “X-Ray Tech.” But Beth wanted to do better. She wanted to get ahead in her chosen field of employment. She decided to become an MRI technologist, what those in the industry call an “MRI Tech.” To do so, she embarked on a self-paid educational program. She enrolled in a six-month full time course, including clinical rotations (on-site training).

In hindsight, perhaps leaving her nest was Beth’s mistake. She gave up security to pursue something better. But who can blame her? Like many of us do in our work, she set out to pursue her next American Dream by attending a respected school in southern California.<sup>2</sup> She was successful in her training in the course named *Magnetic Resonance Imaging*.

I examined evaluations and reference letters that were filled in by people who worked with Beth. A Medical Director gave her the highest possible ratings in nine evaluation categories.<sup>3</sup> A certified MRI Technologist had this to say in her evaluation:

While working with her at St. James Hospital [where she did clinical rotation as part of her training], I was impressed by her motivation and aptitude. [She is] extremely competent with the maturity and modesty to seek out answers and assistance. [She] is a very task-oriented person that takes great pride in accomplishing every goal completely, skillfully, and competently. She has used her own personal time and resources to gain further knowledge of MRI to be prepared for any cross-training opportunities and has actively sought to network with professionals who may be helpful to finding these elusive openings.

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<sup>1</sup> “Golfer,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 1990.

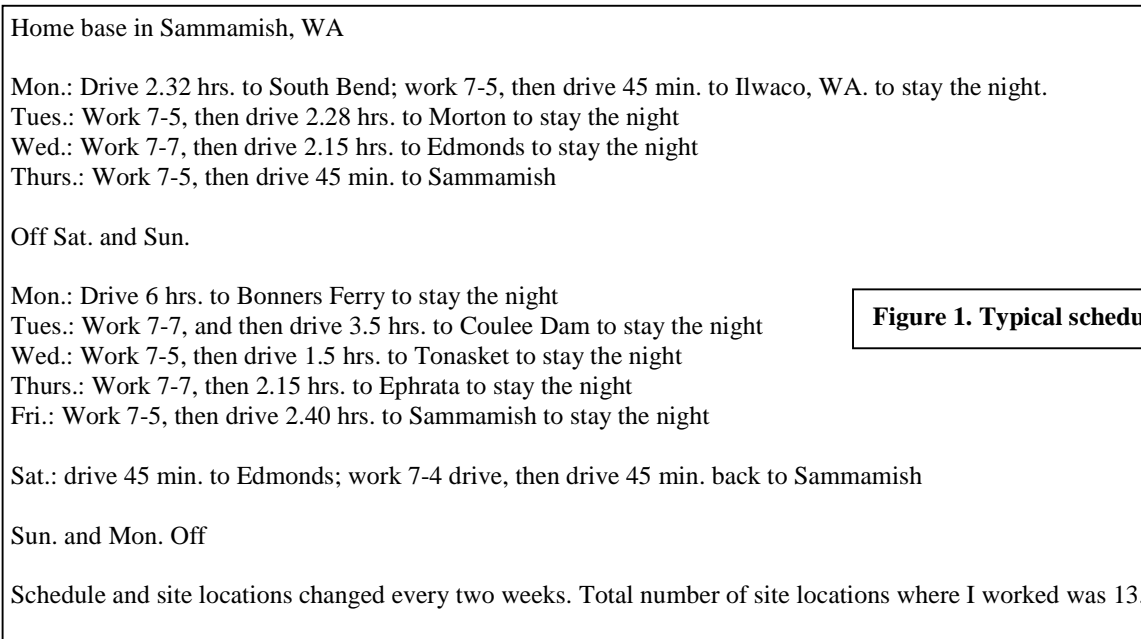
<sup>2</sup> Name withheld to protect the privacy of individuals’ comments about and evaluations of Beth.

<sup>3</sup> Intellectual ability, commitment to service, integrity, cooperation, maturity, self-promotion, interpersonal relationships, emotional stability, oral expression/knowledge of the English language.

A staff physician also gave her the highest ratings for the nine evaluation categories. In addition, she expended considerable time and effort to become a certified radiologist technologist in five states: California, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington (Idaho does not have a state license requirement, and relies on a national program). She was taking no chances and wanted to interview with as many MRI clinics as possible. Thus, began a three-year process to gain a job; again, in a field with frequent (granted, sought-after) vacancies. She traveled in five states at her own expense. She sent 94 applications (mostly online, which required the filling-in of an age field), received five telephone calls, and had four interviews. She received twenty rejection letters.

During this time, she was able to secure a full-time position as MRI technologist at an MRI clinic in Idaho. Consequently, she also gained on-the-job experience. This work required Beth to travel to different locations. I talked with her while she was working at this job. I was taken by her motivation, tenacity and grit. As I thought more about this part of her work, I asked her to write-down a typical work week. She gave me information about a typical two weeks of work, shown in Figure 1.

Beth told me it was not the case that this specific job did not have applicants, although I suspect a lot of us would opt out of this hard work, regardless of our financial situation. She said the job was difficult to fill "...and keep people because of the flexibility required as well as the long hours and drive times." She added, "All of these sites are remote and most the sites [did] not do a wide range of exams for technologists to keep up with their skills."



At the risk of being overly dramatic, look at the amount of time Beth spent driving between the MRI sites. I think of the physical strength and mental determination of this woman and continue to say to myself, I am not sure I could do it.

About less arduous positions to which she sent those applications: I read eight of the rejection letters. They are written as if they were taken from a template: *You are qualified* [in one letter, over-qualified], *but we have selected someone else who* (a) *is internal to the organization*, or (b) *match our requirements better* [cited often] or (c) *gave no reason* [cited very often].

What are we to make of these rejections? I am convinced a significant number of them can be attributed to Beth being 57 years old.

I approached writing this essay only after I felt confident I could offer an accurate narrative about a friend and relative. As most of my readers know, my “reporter” moniker is self-proclaimed. I do not have to be bound by a Columbia School of Journalism credo, but I strive for accuracy. For my occasional humor, I also try to make sure my readers know when the humor is fact or fiction.

Here is my position on what happened to Beth. Too many companies silently say, “Give us the educated, the motivated, the competent Americans, and we will put them to work... as long as they don’t have wrinkles.”

Beth has worked with me on several of my writing projects. It was from my personal experience that I discovered just how much these MRI clinics have missed by not hiring this woman. If I were running companies again, I would *look* for a place for Beth to work in my company. When I discovered one of these people, I would direct them for sure, but I would also encourage them to seek their own level. This level was always...yes, I say always, that’s what achievers do...toward something that made things run better.

Motivation to perform was one of two of my top evaluation criteria. The other was intelligence. Beth has both. She should be awash in job offers.

I cite an old cliché to close this report: “A new broom sweeps clean, but an old broom knows the corners.”