Jeffco commission suit's plaintiff seen as underdog's ally

Wednesday, December 26, 2007

VAL WALTON
News staff writer

Fred Plump looks out for the underdog.

When a guy he knew was sure to get pummeled by friends in the neighborhood, Plump took a stand and walked him to safety.

"I knew they were wrong," Plump said. "So, I decided to walk this guy clean out of the neighborhood, stepping out with my neck on the line. When I saw things that were not right, I was always standing up for others."

Plump, of Fairfield, filed a federal discrimination lawsuit in the early 1970s when he sought to become a Birmingham firefighter after passing the firefighter's exam, but was passed over for a spot.

"That's what opened the door for black firefighters," said Plump, who retired as a lieutenant after a 30-year career.

At 60, Plump is still trying to right what he perceives as wrongs.

He filed a lawsuit Nov. 16 against Alabama's most powerful elected official, Gov. Bob Riley, contending Riley lacked the authority to name a replacement to the Jefferson County Commission seat left vacant when Larry Langford became Birmingham's mayor. Riley named George F. Bowman, 59, a retired two-star general, to the commission on Nov. 21.

The case is set for a hearing Jan. 15 in Montgomery before a three-judge panel.

"Filing this lawsuit against Mr. Riley is nothing new," Plump said. "I wanted the citizens to have a chance to go to the polls and vote for their choice, their candidate, not to have anyone to appoint a person and say, `This is who I want to serve.'"

Plump has since qualified to run for the District 1 seat. The bipartisan Jefferson County Election Commission, which contends it has jurisdiction for filling the commission seat, set a Feb. 5 election. Plump said he has a strong interest in the district and believes he knows its needs.

Riley maintains he did his duty in filling the vacancy.

"Governor Riley's position is that he is simply following what the state law requires," said Jeff Emerson, a spokesman for the governor.

Most days, Plump eats lunch at Glory's Family Dining in Fairfield.

As he munched on his food on a recent day, people stopped by his booth to speak and quiz him about the lawsuit.

Plump said he has encountered a few detractors questioning his decision.

"Somebody had to step out," Plump said. "I had no problem doing that."

Rep. John Rogers, D-Birmingham, applauds Plump for becoming a plaintiff.

"He had enough courage to stand tall," Rogers said.

Rogers said he called Riley and told him he had no authority because local law supersedes state law. "It's

an open-and-shut case," Rogers said. "It doesn't take a legal scholar to figure this out."

Plump credits his hardy resolve to being raised by a strong mother, aunt and grandmother and having faith in God. His aunt and mother stressed the importance of giving back to others.

Seeking the Jefferson County Commission seat would be his second attempt at public office. He ran unsuccessfully for the state House District 57 seat in 2006.

Plump, a married father and grandfather, is best known for his work with youth community sports teams. He has spent 39 years coaching and organizing youth sports with many of his efforts concentrated in West End.

Known as "Coach," Plump said he found that sports helped him when he was a child. He plays golf to help him deal with stress.

Plump, who works as a case assistant in the office of the Jefferson County Conservator, is looking forward to the legal challenge against Riley.

"When you feel you're right and you have right on your side, always go for it," he said. "Too many of our people now see things wrong and will not make a stand."

E-mail: vwalton@bhamnews.com

http://ads.al.com/RealMedia/ads/
http://www.al.com/printer/www.al.com/printer/printer.ssf
http://www.al.com/base/news/1198660529242520.xml&coll=2
http://www.al.com/printer/click_nx.cgi/
http://www.al.com/1
http://www.al.com/printer/printer.ssf?
http://www.al.com/printer/adstream_nx.cgi/
http://www.al.com/printer/adstream_mjx.ads/
http://www.al.com/cgi-bin/stats/verify.cgi?Log=1&v1st=