

WASHINGTON POST**(July 10, 2006 - page A15)****Coming Soon: A Tale of Whistle-Blowing at the EPA
Film to Portray Long Legal Battle With the Agency**

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She sold the story of her battles with the Environmental Protection Agency to Hollywood, and actor Danny Glover is preparing a movie about how she blew the whistle against the agency and successfully sued for race and gender discrimination.

But Coleman-Adebayo is no star at the EPA, which has described her as a bad employee who refuses to work with others. She was allowed to work at home for five years because of a medical condition, but when she resisted coming back in April, the EPA took away her pay.

"They are really trying to break me, financially, emotionally and everything else," Coleman-Adebayo, 53, said in a recent interview.

The tense, stressful, dramatic and sometimes-ugly relationship between employer and employee is the stuff of movies. But the case involves larger issues about how the government treats employees who feel they are being retaliated against. Coleman-Adebayo and others say it amounts to corruption.

Her career at the EPA took a bad turn after she complained that the agency stood by in 1996 as a U.S. chemical company mined a deadly substance in South Africa. She won a \$600,000 discrimination judgment against the agency in 2000.

"Adebayo's case is interesting because the issues of whistle-blowing and retaliation in federal government are larger than any one employee, particularly in the wake of Sept. 11," said Joslyn Barnes, a New York screenwriter who is working on the screenplay.

The EPA declined to discuss Coleman-Adebayo's complaints because a second lawsuit she filed against the agency is pending and because her case is a personnel matter.

"EPA will not comment on the specifics of the pending litigation except to deny that EPA has discriminated or retaliated against Dr. Coleman-Adebayo," EPA spokeswoman Jennifer Wood said in a prepared statement last month.

The agency's opinions of Coleman-Adebayo are revealed in court documents and recent e-mails that she provided. In one e-mail, a supervisor, Rafael DeLeon, dismissed her complaints of "hostile workplace events" and a "pattern and practice of harassment." They are not medical facts,

he wrote. They "merely represent your self-serving and baseless version of events."

Court records show that the EPA includes one white supervisor who referred to Coleman-Adebayo, who is African American, as "an honorary white person," and another supervisor who allegedly referred to her as "uppity," a segregation-era word for black people who do not accept the notion that they are inferior. The supervisors were never reprimanded.

The federal workplace is rife with complaints by whistle-blowers of retaliation, often involving threats of job loss. Such complaints usually play out in an arcane equal-opportunity process, rarely seeing the light of day.

Coleman-Adebayo's case stands out because her crusade against what she calls "government corruption" won her powerful allies, such as President Bush and House Judiciary Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.), who recently wrote a letter to the EPA on her behalf.

Lodging Complaints

Sixteen years ago, Coleman-Adebayo was a promising hire, having graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a doctorate in African studies. Her work was generally commended.

But when Coleman-Adebayo traveled to South Africa as part of a U.S. delegation focusing on the environment in 1996, her career took a turn for the worse.

She became a whistle-blower after discovering that a U.S. chemical company was mining a deadly substance in South Africa called vanadium pentoxide. Exposure often turns the tongue blue, causes nosebleeds, kidney and liver dysfunction, and sometimes cancer.

When the EPA did not react to her complaints, she took the issue to non-government interest groups. The EPA finally reacted -- against Coleman-Adebayo. Her evaluations worsened, and she said her requests for promotions were denied as white men with far less experience rose above her pay grade.

Coleman-Adebayo sued, and her court battle in 2000 played out like a war. EPA managers said they were upset over the South Africa incident.

"She disagreed with me and made criticisms of the way the agency, of which she was a part, was doing its job," William Nitze, an EPA supervisor who worked in South Africa, testified in 2000. "You have to understand that when we try and organize and manage a program at EPA, we tried to do it as a team."

The agency said the men who rose to positions above Coleman-Adebayo's did so because they were better fundraisers and got along better with others.

Coleman-Adebayo's lawyers said race was also a factor. Witnesses said a white assistant administrator, Alan Bruce Sielen, motioned Coleman-Adebayo into a meeting of mostly white people and said it was all right because she was "an honorary white person."

Sielen denied the claim, but one of the witnesses, a black man, said he confronted Sielen after he also called him an honorary white person. Later in testimony, Coleman-Adebayo said Sielen told her she was denied a promotion because another supervisor said she was too "uppity."

The supervisor, Alan Hecht, a deputy administrator, denied the claim. The EPA fought back, enlisting psychiatrist Christiane Tellefsen to assess Coleman-Adebayo's mental state. Tellefsen said in testimony that Coleman-Adebayo was a self-centered, narcissistic woman who "tended to speak in a dramatic way."

In explaining how Coleman-Adebayo was "passive-aggressive," Tellefsen said she was uncooperative, even when asked to provide her children's names. But in cross-examination, lawyers showed that Coleman-Adebayo did provide the children's names, but the doctor believed the African names were made up. Coleman-Adebayo's husband is Nigerian.

The testimony of Jon T. Grand, who had been an EPA manager, offered evidence that Coleman-Adebayo's discrimination claim had merit. Grand, who is white, recalled that a white manager privately told him that they called her "Rosa Parks of the EPA" behind her back.

Years later, Grand's career at the EPA would free-fall. The agency had him prosecuted, and he was sent to jail because he did not report the EPA's mistake of overpaying him when he worked for the agency in Denmark. Grand said that he did report the error, but a secretary failed to act. Facing a long prison sentence, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to four months in jail.

"I do actually believe that had I not testified, this would never have happened," Grand said.

Another Fight, Another Suit

Coleman-Adebayo won her case but was later found to have uncontrollable hypertension. The EPA asked her to resign, but she refused, saying the men who discriminated against her were allowed to stay.

The agency agreed to temporarily allow Coleman-Adebayo to work from home. But her telecommute lasted for four years as her illness worsened. During that time, she helped form the No Fear Coalition to protect whistle-blowers and worked with Congress to make the No Fear (Notification and Federal Employee Anti-Discrimination and Retaliation) Act into law in 2002.

Good Housekeeping magazine presented her in 2003 with its Women in Government award for courage. Later that year, Coleman-Adebayo filed a second lawsuit, alleging retaliation by the EPA.

A year later, she was reassigned from a specialist job to a lower analyst position, effective Dec. 1, 2004. Eight days later, the agency placed her in yet another post.

The EPA sent a letter saying the new job would be "done in an office setting." Coleman-Adebayo read it at the cluttered desk in her kitchen, surrounded by numerous bottles of medication prescribed for hypertension and glaucoma.

For a year, Coleman-Adebayo and the EPA traded letters like punches. She continued to telecommute until the agency ordered her into the office this April. After complaining of dizziness, she left in an ambulance. The EPA placed her on family leave, without pay.

Coleman-Adebayo's response seemed worthy of a line in the screenplay.

"They want me to make a choice between my life and my job," she said.

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