

1987 hero's burned in new trauma

BY TINA MOORE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

ALL BUT ONE of her family members died in a raging house fire on Long Island nearly 20 years ago, attracting headlines that told of hope amid tragedy.

Tracey McSwigin, then 14, was hailed a hero for saving her 11-year-old brother's life in the 1987 blaze. President Ronald Reagan even recognized her with a personally signed plaque.

In the years that followed, she grieved for her parents and two sisters, but life went on. She got married, took the name Attis, had a daughter and got a good job in human resources at a development and real estate firm.

But when her brother died June 5 of a heart attack, her anguish came rushing back, she said, launching her into a spiral that ended in a stay at a psychiatric hospital.

Now, in an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint her attorney plans to file today against Sheldon Solow Realty Development Corp., Attis alleges she was illegally fired because of a mental disability.

"This wasn't just like losing my brother," Attis told the Daily News. "I was in this hole and I couldn't get out."

Attis' attorney, Len Leeds of LMB Law, said the EEOC complaint could lead to a \$10 million federal lawsuit.

"This is not a mom-and-pop operation. This is one of the biggest real estate corporations in the city," Leeds said. "What's the big deal if someone needs a month to grieve?"

Sheldon Solow, who is ranked 746th on this year's Forbes Magazine's World's Richest People list, released a statement yesterday through a spokesman.

"This is a very sad situation, and we have great sympathy for Ms. Attis, but we have done everything we could to possibly help her, including a \$15,000 loan from Mr. Solow to help her pay for her brother's wake," the statement said. "It is worth noting that Ms. Attis was an independent contractor who worked for the Solow organization for less than seven months."

In an interview with The News, Attis recalled how she was fleeing the raging blaze, ready to go out the back door, when she heard her brother Terry's cries and went to him.

When firefighters found them, the siblings were severely burned but alive.

The children's parents, Sharon, 41, and Terence, a 44-year-old retired cop, and sisters Heather, 9, and Jennifer, 7, didn't survive.

Investigators said the fire was ignited by a cigarette smoldering in the cushion of a living room chair.

Attis — her leg, stomach, neck and face burned and her lungs seared — spent several months in the Nassau County Medical Center.

"They didn't think I would live," said Attis, who underwent three dozen operations. Doctors gave her brother a 50-50 chance of survival.

Two months ago, Terry McSwigin died of cardiac arrest, Attis said.

She said her troubles began at her brother's June 9 wake — which, she said, Solow attended, even holding her hand. Two weeks later, she suffered a breakdown at work, the complaint alleges.

With her company's blessing, Attis said she checked herself into the hospital for psychiatric treatment.

The complaint says she called Solow's assistant July 16 and was assured that her job was safe.

Two days later, she says, she was fired.

"I'm tired of being knocked down," Attis said. "I'm 33 years old, and I've seen more tragedy than most people see in a lifetime."

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BRYAN SMITH

Tracey Attis, 33, is filing complaint against developer for being fired while seeking psychiatric treatment.