



ANDREW MILLER JOURNAL PHOTO

**MARTIN PERALTA**, right, explains why he is suing the Hess gas station that fired him after 26 years of employment. Peralta and his lawyer, Ravi Bhalla, left, are suing on the grounds of age discrimination.

## Out of job after 26 'no-problem' years, he's suing Hess Oil

By **BONNIE FRIEDMAN**  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

HOBOKEN — Martin Peralta says he gave the best years of his life to his job with Merit Oil/Hess, working upwards of 60 hours a week as a gas station manager in some of northern New Jersey's toughest neighborhoods.

But in February, after 26 years of service, the 59-year-old Hoboken resident was promptly fired and replaced with someone half his age.

"In 26 years, no one gave me a reprimand," he said. "People in the street say, 'What happened, you have 26 years. The company had no reason to fire you.'"

Last week, Peralta's attorney, Ravinder Bhalla, filed suit against Amerada Hess Corp. in state Superior Court, charging the company with age discrimination and seeking lost wages, pension benefits and punitive damages.

"The goal of Hess was to save money, and it had little or no loyalty to its employees," Bhalla said.

Jay Wilson, a spokesman for Hess, declined to be interviewed for this story.

In 1979, shortly after moving to Hoboken from the Dominican Republic, Peralta started working as a gas station manager at the Merit Oil gas station at 14th Street and Willow Avenue. He also worked at other gas stations throughout North Jersey, many in some tough neighborhoods — and was robbed several times at gunpoint.

He said he did so well at his job he was even tapped to train other managers at facilities throughout the state.

"Merit was very fair," he said. "Every three months I would get a bonus."

But conditions changed when Hess took over the company several years ago, Peralta said.

The company froze salaries for two years, abolished paid vacations and required employees to work long hours with only one day off a week, he said.

And Peralta said the worst part was that managers were forced to train replacements before taking vacation.

"There were managers who would never take vacations because they were afraid they would come back and not get their jobs back," he said. "All the time, I trained people and I was never scared, because I had been there for 26 years."

Shortly before leaving for vacation last November, Peralta asked his supervisor to install surveillance cameras around an East Orange gas station where there had been three robberies.

But Peralta said he was informed that the company could not afford the expense.

And then, last December, after returning from vacation, Peralta said his boss tried to blame him for an accounting error that arose from new computer equipment, even though other gas stations also had similar problems.

Two months later, he was placed on suspension. Peralta didn't learn that he had actually been fired until his daughter called human resources.

Peralta, who is receiving unemployment benefits, said he's been on two interviews since losing his job.

"The people say, 'How old are you?' and I say, 'I'm 60,'" Peralta said. "And they say, 'I'll call you.'"