

Harassment Lawsuit Trial Begins; 2 Women Say They Are Victims of Videotaping

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Were Patti Kidder and Katherine Dean victims of retaliation for complaining about a fellow employee who secretly videotaped them at work or are they money-hungry opportunists looking to profit from the incident?

That's the issue before a Palm Beach County jury that began hearing testimony Tuesday in the workplace harassment lawsuit against Ocwen Financial Corp. of West Palm Beach. Kidder and Dean are seeking damages for "unlawful, outrageous and shocking conduct" by Ocwen and its employees, said George Supran, one of two lawyers representing the women.

In his opening statement, Supran said that in March 1999, Kidder, 30, and Dean, 32, were victimized by a co-worker and then revictimized when fellow employees ridiculed them and made jokes at their expense, and superiors ignored their complaints.

The company went out of its way to investigate claims that someone twice spied on women in bathrooms of The Forum building on Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard, said Dan Rosenbaum, an attorney representing Ocwen.

After getting an e-mail from Kidder in which she reported seeing a man's hand move a ceiling tile in a third-floor restroom, Ocwen's vice president of human resources immediately contacted a facilities supervisor to investigate, Rosenbaum said.

When another woman reported a similar incident weeks later in a first-floor bathroom, human resources again thoroughly investigated, Rosenbaum said. But the accounts differed -- Kidder and Dean reported seeing a black hand while the woman in the other instance said she saw the hand of a white man -- and the investigations failed to turn up any leads, Rosenbaum said.

In April 1999, sheriff's deputies showed up at Ocwen with photographs of Kidder and Dean taken from video footage allegedly shot by Ronald Minnis Jr., who at the time worked in Ocwen's debt collection department on the same floor as Kidder and Dean.

Minnis, 31, was charged with several crimes, including voyeurism, after being seen outside a woman's apartment. Deputies found a video camera containing footage of women, including Kidder and Dean, secretly filmed in their homes and an office. Minnis told police he sold footage of women undressing to Internet sites.

Ocwen immediately suspended Minnis and fired him two days later, Rosenbaum said.

But after that, Rosenbaum said, Kidder and Dean began doctoring their story.

"That's when the whole story is jimmied to try to get money," Rosenbaum said. "That's what this case is all about."

The charges against Minnis have since been dropped.

Kidder and Dean have been traumatized by the thought of their images possibly appearing on the Internet, Supran said.

After filing suit in 2000, Kidder gave a deposition in which she admitted to having been a topless dancer before going to work for Ocwen. A short time later, Ocwen fired her. Kidder claims it was a retaliatory act, but Rosenbaum said Kidder was terminated for lying on her resume.

Dean left Ocwen a short time later when she could no longer stand the harassment, Supran said.

Supran said his clients were "belittled, demeaned and robbed of their self-respect" and for that they will ask for substantial damages. Rosenbaum said the women lack credibility and are solely motivated by financial gain.

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