

The \$67 Million Pants

Washington, D.C., Lawyer Sues Dry Cleaners for Lost Trousers

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Is somebody getting taken to the cleaners?

A \$10 dry cleaning bill for a pair of trousers has ballooned into a \$67 million civil lawsuit.

Plaintiff Roy Pearson, a judge in Washington, D.C., says in court papers that he's been through the ringer over a lost pair of prized pants he wanted to wear on his first day on the bench.

He says in court papers that he has endured "mental suffering, inconvenience and discomfort."

He says he was unable to wear that favorite suit on his first day of work.

He's suing for 10 years of weekend car rentals so he can transport his dry cleaning to another store.

The lawsuit is based in large part on Pearson's seemingly pained admission that he was taken in by the oldest and most insidious marketing tool in the dry cleaning industry arsenal.

"Satisfaction Guaranteed."

Pearson did not return numerous calls from ABC News for comment.

It's the kind of lawsuit that makes liability reform advocates' temples throb.

"People in America are now scared of each other," legal expert Philip Howard told ABC News' Law & Justice Unit. "That's why teachers won't put an arm around a crying child, and doctors order unnecessary tests, and ministers won't meet with parishioners. It's a distrust of justice and it's changing our culture."

The civil trial, set for June, has the scope of a John Grisham courtroom thriller and the societal importance of a traffic ticket.

Pearson plans to call 63 witnesses.

Defending themselves against the suit -- for two years running -- are Korean immigrants Jin and Soo

Chung and their son, who own Custom Cleaners and two other dry cleaning shops in the Fort Lincoln section of Washington, D.C.

The ABC News Law & Justice Unit has calculated that for \$67 million Pearson could buy 83,750 new pairs of pants at the \$800 value he placed on the missing trousers in court documents.

Fort Lincoln neighbors are enjoying what they consider the comedy of it all.

"The whole city is aware of this lawsuit," said Bob King, who represents Fort Lincoln on the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions. "Everybody's laughing about it."

Everybody except the Chungs, who have spent thousands of dollars defending themselves against Pearson's lawsuit.

"It's not humorous, not funny and nobody would have thought that something like this would have happened," Soo Chung told ABC News through an interpreter.

Her husband agreed.

"It's affecting us first of all financially, because of all the lawyers' fees," Jin Chung said. "For two years, we've been paying lawyer fees. & We've gotten bad credit as well, and secondly, it's been difficult mentally and physically because of the level of stress."

Later, Soo Chung broke down in tears.

"I would have never thought it would have dragged on this long," she told ABC News. "I don't want to live here anymore. It's been so difficult. I just want to go home, go back to Korea."

"I've been in the dry cleaning business for 14 years, but this has never ever happened before. If anything happened to our customers' clothing, we would always compensate them accordingly and fairly," Jin Chung said through a translator.

The problems date back to 2002.

Pearson says in court papers that he took a pair of pants into Custom Cleaners in Fort Lincoln that year, and the pants were lost.

So Jin and Soo Chung gave Pearson a \$150 check for a new pair of pants.

Three years later, Pearson says he returned to Custom Cleaners and -- like some real-life "Groundhog Day" nightmare -- his trousers went missing.

Again.

It was May 2005 and Pearson was about to begin his new job as an administrative judge. Naturally, he wanted to wear a nice outfit to his first day of work. He said in court papers that he tried on five Hickey Freeman suits from his closet, but found them all to be "too tight," according to the Washington Post.

He brought one pair in for alterations and they went missing -- gray trousers with what Pearson described in court papers as blue and red stripes on them.

First, Pearson demanded \$1,150 for a new suit. Lawyers were hired, legal wrangling ensued and eventually the Chungs offered Pearson \$3,000 in compensation.

No dice.

Then they offered him \$4,600.

No dice.

Finally, they offered \$12,000 for the missing gray trousers with the red and blue stripes.

Pearson said no.

With neither satisfaction nor his prized gray pants, Pearson upped the ante considerably.

The judge went to the lawbooks. Citing the District of Columbia's consumer protection laws, he claims he is entitled to \$1,500 per violation.

Per day.

What follows is the beginning of thousands of pages of legal documents and correspondence that, two years later, have led to a massive civil lawsuit in the amount of \$67 million.

According to court papers, here's how Pearson calculates the damages and legal fees:

He believes he is entitled to \$1,500 for each violation, each day during which the "Satisfaction Guaranteed" sign and another sign promising "Same Day Service" was up in the store -- more than 1,200 days.

And he's multiplying each violation by three because he's suing Jin and Soo Chung and their son.

He also wants \$500,000 in emotional damages and \$542,500 in legal fees, even though he is representing himself in court.

He wants \$15,000 for 10 years' worth of weekend car rentals as well.

After enlisting neighbors and fellow customers, he sought to expand the case into a class action suit, but was denied, angrily, by District of Columbia Civil Judge Neal Kravitz.

"The Court has significant concerns that the plaintiff is acting in bad faith and with an intent to delay the proceedings," the judge wrote in court papers. "Indeed, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion, given the plaintiff's lengthy delay in seeking to expand the scope of the case, the breathtaking magnitude of the expansion he seeks, his failure to present any evidence in support of the thousands of claims he says he wishes to add, and his misrepresentation concerning the scope of his first amended complaint."

The case will now be heard by another judge in June. Both Kravitz and the new judge declined to comment on the case to ABC News.

Ironically, less than a week after Pearson dropped off the missing trousers in 2005, Soo Chung found them, she says. She tried to return them to Pearson but he said they were the wrong pants.

The Chungs say they are certain they have located the missing trousers.

"So these are the missing pants, huh?" Avila asked the Chungs' attorney, Chris Manning.

"These are," Manning said, holding up a flimsy pair of gray trousers.

Manning's argument is based on both the receipt and the telltale "three belt loop situation," as he explains it.

"When the pants were brought in, Mrs. Chung noticed the three belt loop situation and in finding them realized that they were Mr. Pearson's pants based on that."

He also said the receipt tag on the pants "exactly matches the receipt that Mr. Pearson has."

Manning is angry with Pearson, saying the judge has terrorized the Chungs for spite.

"They came to the United States hoping for the American dream," Manning said, "and Roy Pearson has made it a nightmare."

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