



Judge Sues Cleaner for \$65M Over Pants

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WASHINGTON -- The Chungs, immigrants from South Korea, realized their American dream when they opened their dry-cleaning business seven years ago in the nation's capital. For the past two years, however, they've been dealing with the nightmare of litigation: a \$65 million lawsuit over a pair of missing pants.

Jin Nam Chung, Ki Chung and their son, Soo Chung, are so disheartened that they're considering moving back to Seoul, said their attorney, Chris Manning, who spoke on their behalf.

"They're out a lot of money, but more importantly, incredibly disenchanting with the system," Manning said. "This has destroyed their lives."

The lawsuit was filed by a District of Columbia administrative hearings judge, Roy Pearson, who has been representing himself in the case.

Pearson did not return phone calls and e-mails Wednesday from The Associated Press requesting comment.

According to court documents, the problem began in May 2005 when Pearson became a judge and brought several suits for alteration to Custom Cleaners in Northeast Washington, a place he patronized regularly despite previous disagreements with the Chungs. A pair of pants from one suit was not ready when he requested it two days later, and was deemed to be missing.

Pearson asked the cleaners for the full price of the suit: more than \$1,000.

But a week later, the Chungs said the pants had been found and refused to pay. That's when Pearson decided to sue.

Manning said the cleaners made three settlement offers to Pearson. First they offered \$3,000, then \$4,600, then \$12,000. But Pearson wasn't satisfied and expanded his calculations beyond one pair of pants.

Because Pearson no longer wanted to use his neighborhood dry cleaner, part of his lawsuit calls for \$15,000 -- the price to rent a car every weekend for 10 years to go to another business.

"He's somehow purporting that he has a constitutional right to a dry cleaner within four blocks of his apartment," Manning said.

But the bulk of the \$65 million comes from Pearson's strict interpretation of D.C.'s

consumer protection law, which fines violators \$1,500 per violation, per day. According to court papers, Pearson added up 12 violations over 1,200 days, and then multiplied that by three defendants.

Much of Pearson's case rests on two signs that Custom Cleaners once had on its walls: "Satisfaction Guaranteed" and "Same Day Service."

Based on Pearson's dissatisfaction and the delay in getting back the pants, he claims the signs amount to fraud.

Pearson has appointed himself to represent all customers affected by such signs, though D.C. Superior Court Judge Neal Kravitz, who will hear the June 11 trial, has said that this is a case about one plaintiff, and one pair of pants.

Sherman Joyce, president of the American Tort Association, has written a letter to the group of men who will decide this week whether to renew Pearson's 10-year appointment. Joyce is asking them to reconsider.

Chief Administrative Judge Tyrone Butler had no comment regarding Pearson's reappointment.

The association, which tries to police the kind of abusive lawsuits that hurt small businesses, also has offered to buy Pearson the suit of his choice.

And former National Labor Relations Board chief administrative law judge Melvin Welles wrote to The Washington Post to urge "any bar to which Mr. Pearson belongs to immediately disbar him and the District to remove him from his position as an administrative law judge."

"There has been a significant groundswell of support for the Chungs," said Manning, adding that plans for a defense fund Web site are in the works.

To the Chungs and their attorney, one of the most frustrating aspects of the case is their claim that Pearson's gray pants were found a week after Pearson dropped them off in 2005. They've been hanging in Manning's office for more than a year.

Pearson claims in court documents that his pants had blue and red pinstripes.

"They match his inseam measurements. The ticket on the pants match his receipt," Manning said.