

Friend of Animals: Lawsuit says boss ruled with an iron fist of fear

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Thursday, September 29, 2011 10:30 AM

A case against Darien-based not-for-profit Friends of Animals continues with accusations of a corporate culture of fear, mishandling of funds and mistreatment of ill employees.

Last summer, a judge dismissed part of a claim by a former Friends of Animals accountant Sharon Kospore against the Darien-based not-for-profit as redundant but denied the request to dismiss claims of whistle-blower retaliation and disability discrimination.

Kospore, who worked for the animal rights charity from May 2008 until she was fired in November 2009, stated in papers filed with the Stamford State Superior Court at the end of 2009 that the firing was in retaliation for reporting "illegal and unethical behavior" by Friends of Animals.

Kospore also alleges that she was fired after missing work due to a legitimate illness.

Kospore was an accountant at Friends of Animals when she claims she what she believed to be a "misuse of donated funds" occurred.

The money was related to Primarily Primates in Texas as well as excessive spending while the charity, she said, was losing money.

Kospore took her concerns to the other charity staff, according to court papers, as well as the state attorney general's office, both of which resulted in her termination, she claims.

In a court document filed last month, Kospore describes Friends of Animals' president Priscilla Feral's "iron fist of fear."

"There was also a palpable feeling of fear amongst FoA's employees when it came to disagreeing with Feral's dictates," according to court documents.

Regarding Primarily Primates in Texas, Kospore alleges that Friends of Animals contributed more than \$3 million toward lawsuits involving the sanctuary.

The documents say People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, was on the other side of the lawsuit, and said Feral testified that "FoA and PETA don't like each other" and said PETA has "no integrity."

Kospore said she was concerned that most of the donors to Friends of Animals "were largely unaware that the most significant portion of the money donated to FoA was going to Primarily Primates, and specifically, its litigation battles."

Konspore also testified she was in a meeting where Feral “specifically cited two employees’ health conditions as reasons for discharging them.”

Konspore also testified she was met with an angry tirade when she questioned cuts to employee benefits while Feral was driving a company BMW.

In response to Konspore’s filing, Friends of Animals management said Konspore’s health was accommodated and she had a poor attitude and was regularly making negative comments about the non-profit going out of business due to financial problems.

Regarding Feral’s BMW, e-mails released by Friends of Animals show her car and its insurance were part of Feral’s compensation package “as well as an asset and benefit to FoA.”

The document also cites Konspore as difficult to work with, and talking about Feral behind her back.

As far as being fired due to her medical condition, Friends of Animals employees testified they made as many accommodations as they could, but the company could not function without a full-time accountant.

After making several accommodations, and confirming with the Department of Labor and their insurance broker, Friends of Animals employees gave Konspore a date by which she would need to return to work — Nov. 3, 2009 — or call to let them know if she could not.

Instead of returning to work, Konspore’s attorney sent a letter to Friends of Animals on that date threatening litigation and asking for an extension until Nov. 20.

“Based on plaintiff’s inability to return to work or supply a timetable for a return, and consistent with its organizational needs, FoA responded that it could no longer hold the position open for plaintiff,” the court documents say.

Feral told The Darien Times in December 2009 that the termination was because Konspore being unwilling to return to work after going on disability.

Feral also told The Times when the lawsuit was filed that the court papers the charity was served with regarding the lawsuit were the first indication that Konspore had reported Friends of Animals for misusing its donations.

“We had no knowledge whatsoever of this,” she said. Feral said that the primate sanctuary in Texas was a proper use of an animal-friendly charity’s donations.

“She’s alleging something wrong in investing in the future of a sanctuary. It is a crazy idea. Whatever she alleges is to torment us into paying her a whopping sum of money. This is a harassment lawsuit,” Feral said at the time.

Friends of Animals declined comment this week.

Konspore's attorney, Mark Sherman said: "The legal papers speak for themselves and we look forward to presenting Sharon's case at trial."

The criminal case against a Darien High School teacher charged with a public indecency misdemeanor, who returned to work last September, is now approaching two years without being resolved.

English department head Douglas Paulsen was cited Nov. 24, 2009, after a 28-year-old man, Eric Soria, accused him of masturbating in a shower while watching Soria at an LA Fitness gym in Norwalk.

He was reinstated to his former position last September after serving a paid suspension last semester following the arrest.

Paulsen's next court date is Friday, Oct. 28.

In April 2009, Westcott told The Darien Times that Soria had asked for a \$55,000 payment from Paulsen due to suffering social awkwardness and emotional trauma since the alleged event.

Court records show Soria filed a civil suit against Paulsen in Dec. 2010.

Soria's attorney, Nicholas Adamucci, told The Darien Times the civil case is on hold until the resolution of the criminal case.

Once the criminal case is resolved, Adamucci said a deposition of Paulsen is planned.

Adamucci also said he believes Paulsen will be applying for accelerated rehabilitation at the next court date, which he and his client will object to, and added as a former swim coach, Soria finds it "worrisome" that Paulsen was returned to his job at Darien High School before the case was resolved.

Paulsen's attorney, William Westcott, said his client has continued to appear "in court to defend against the allegations that have been pending for nearly two years now."

"People who are familiar with the court system know that it is easy to resolve a case quickly for a defendant who wishes to enter a guilty plea," he said.

"Mr. Paulsen, however, continues to strenuously claim his innocence in this case. He has repeatedly declined opportunities to resolve his case through a plea bargain. He remains patient and confident as the process moves forward," Westcott said.

Schools Superintendent Stephen Falcone declined comment.