

Grammy Awards chief files discrimination complaint against Recording Academy

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LOS ANGELES — The head of the academy behind the Grammy Awards filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on Tuesday, claiming she was placed on administrative leave in retaliation for having sent a memo outlining concerns about the organization.

Deborah Dugan, who was placed on leave as chief executive of the Recording Academy last week, says in the complaint that she sent an email on Dec. 22 to the director of human resources detailing "egregious conflicts of interest, improper self-dealing by board members and voting irregularities with respect to nominations for Grammy Awards, all made possible by the 'boys' club' mentality and approach to governance at the academy."

Dugan, who took the helm of the academy in August, alleges unlawful gender discrimination, sexual harassment, unlawful retaliation and unequal pay. She also claims that she told human resources that she had been sexually harassed by Joel Katz, a powerful lawyer in the music industry who serves as the academy's general counsel.

An attorney for Katz said he denied Dugan's claims.

"Ms. Dugan's allegations of harassment and her description of a dinner at the steakhouse in the Ritz Carlton, Laguna Niguel are false and Mr. Katz categorically and emphatically denies her version of that evening," the lawyer, Howard Weitzman, said Tuesday night.

"Mr. Katz believed they had a productive and professional meeting in a restaurant where a number of members of the Board of Trustees of the Academy, and others, were dining.

"Ms. Dugan's claims are made, for the first time, 7 months after this dinner took place. Mr. Katz will cooperate in any and all investigations or lawsuits by telling the absolute and whole truth. Hopefully, Ms. Dugan will do the same."

Dugan's attorneys, in a statement obtained by NBC News, likened the Recording Academy to people who defend former film mogul Harvey Weinstein, who is standing trial in New York on rape charges. (Weinstein has pleaded not guilty in that case and denies all allegations of nonconsensual sex.)

"The complaint that we filed today against the [academy] highlights tactics reminiscent of those deployed by individuals defending Harvey Weinstein," the lawyers, Douglas H. Wigdor and Michael J. Willemin, said in the statement. "As we allege, the attempt by the Recording Academy to impugn the character of Deborah Dugan is a transparent effort to shift the focus away from its unlawful activity."

Dugan was put on administrative leave Thursday because she was the subject of what the academy called "a formal allegation of misconduct by a senior female member" of the organization. But in her complaint, Dugan claims that the explanation was "completely false and defamatory."

The academy's board of trustees has retained two independent third-party investigators to look into the allegation, according to a statement released last week.

The academy did not provide specifics on the allegation against Dugan, but a person with direct knowledge of the events said a complaint was filed by an assistant to her predecessor, Neil Portnow. The assistant accused Dugan of a bullying management style.

In a statement, the Recording Academy said in part: "It is curious that Ms. Dugan never raised these grave allegations until a week after legal claims were made against her personally by a female employee who alleged Ms. Dugan had created a 'toxic and intolerable' work environment and engaged in 'abusive and bullying conduct'. When Ms. Dugan did raise her 'concerns' to HR, she specifically instructed HR 'not to take any action' in response."

The academy added: "Ms. Dugan was placed on administrative leave only after offering to step down and demanding \$22 million from the Academy, which is a not-for-profit organization."

In response, Dugan's attorneys said in part that "the assertion that Ms. Dugan did not raise concerns prior to the accusations manufactured against her is completely false."

"Ms. Dugan repeatedly raised concerns throughout her entire tenure at the academy, and even gave large presentations focused on diversity and inclusion at board meetings," they said.

In the complaint, Dugan called the claim that she had demanded \$22 million "flat out false."

Dugan, the first woman to sit atop the Recording Academy, previously led (RED), a prominent charity co-founded by U2 frontman Bono in 2006 that raises money to fight HIV/AIDS and other diseases in Africa.

The legal drama comes in the run-up to the 62nd Grammy Awards ceremony on Sunday.

