

Ousted Grammy CEO Deborah Dugan Files Discrimination Charge Against Recording Academy

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January 21,
2020

On January 21, the law firm Wigdor LLP filed a charge of discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on behalf of Deborah Dugan, the former CEO and president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the awards body behind the Grammys. This news comes five days before the annual Grammy Awards on January 26, in response to Dugan's being abruptly put on "leave of absence" by the Academy last week over allegations of misconduct. The filing claims that Dugan faced unlawful gender discrimination, sexual harassment, unlawful retaliation, and unequal pay. The firm released a statement from attorneys Douglas H. Wigdor and Michael J. Willemin, which reads:

"The complaint that we filed today against the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (the Grammys) highlights tactics reminiscent of those deployed by individuals defending Harvey Weinstein. 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 own unlawful activity. This blatant form of retaliation in corporate America is all too common, even post #MeToo, and we will utilize all lawful means necessary to ensure that those responsible are held accountable for their actions."

This statement comes one day after her interim replacement at the Academy, Harvey Mason Jr., published a letter to the Grammy website that stated that Dugan only made "unsubstantiated" allegations against the Academy "after we received the employee complaints against Ms. Dugan," and offered to "withdraw" these claims only if she "was paid millions of dollars." A representative for Wigdor calls this letter a "false, retaliatory, and defamatory" attempt to discredit the discrimination charges and "further destroy Ms. Dugan's reputation."

The filing contains many shocking allegations, reframing the circumstances behind Dugan's dismissal as a retaliation against her efforts to dismantle the "boy's club" status quo at the Academy. It claims that once she assumed the position at the Academy, Dugan aimed to curb the "impropriety" practice of "exorbitant" expenditures on outside counsel, which included paying millions to a stable of lawyers including Joel Katz of Greenberg Traurig and Chuck Ortner of Porskauer Rose. Katz, the filing revealed, had allegedly harassed Dugan herself at a business meeting in May 2019, before she assumed the Academy position, in which she claims he repeatedly called her "baby," commented on her appearance, and made unwelcome advances. According to the filing, in May, the Board also asked Dugan to

hire ex-CEO Neil Portnow as a “consultant” for \$750,000, after she had just been informed that Portnow had been accused of rape by a foreign female artist “following a performance that she gave at Carnegie Hall.” With that information, Dugan refused to give Portnow the requested amount.

The filing states that after holding a meeting to make clear her efforts to improve diversity and dismantle the “boy’s club,” the Board effectively stripped her “of all meaningful responsibilities,” including the authority to hire or dismiss employees. The filing also reframes the initial grounds for Dugan’s dismissal, stating that the Board had blown Portnow’s ex-assistant’s complaints “way out of proportion to use it as an excuse to grasp control over the management of the Academy because they were unhappy with Ms. Dugan’s calls for more diversity and transparency.” After Dugan sent an email to the Academy’s managing director of HR, the Academy placed her on leave. The filing lists Gabrielle Union, Sheryl Crow, and Megyn Kelly, among Dugan’s supporters.