

Deborah Dugan Tried To Fix The Grammys. Instead She Says She Was 'Ruined' By A Boys' Club.

 [huffpost.com/entry/deborah-dugan-recording-academy-grammys-boys-club_n_5e2a37b2c5b6d6767fd15f58](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/deborah-dugan-recording-academy-grammys-boys-club_n_5e2a37b2c5b6d6767fd15f58)

By Emily Peck

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From the outside, it looks like the Grammys have come a long way from 2017, when the award show was widely criticized for being dominated by men.

Powerhouse artists like Lizzo, Billie Eilish and Ariana Grande are set to perform Sunday night at the music awards, hosted by Alicia Keys. Women make up the majority of nominees in the four biggest categories, including Song of the Year and Best New Artist.

Five of the eight nominees for Album of the Year are women. That's a big turnaround from the past: From 2013 to 2018, a staggering 91% of Grammy nominees were men.

Former Grammy chief Deborah Dugan, who filed a lawsuit against the Recording Academy, is interviewed Thursday on "Good Morning America."

Behind the scenes, however, the game is still rigged in favor of the powerful and well-compensated men who actually run the show, according to explosive allegations from Deborah Dugan. She was put on leave last week from her role as CEO of the Recording Academy, the nonprofit in charge of the Grammys, a little more than a week before the award show.

Dugan was the organization's first female leader. She told HuffPost that she was forced out by the academy's male board members and powerful lawyers after trying to make significant changes at the academy and speaking up about sexual harassment at the organization.

"I knew it was going to be an old boys' club, deeply entrenched and not diverse institution," Dugan said Thursday. "I had no idea how bad it would be."

U2 singer Bono with Deborah Dugan, when she was CEO of his (Red) charity, in New York City on June 2, 2012, in New York.

Dugan, 61, filed a bombshell 44-page sexual harassment complaint Tuesday against the academy with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which handles discrimination complaints.

In it, Dugan said she faced sustained, persistent sexual harassment from the group's lead lawyer, Joel Katz, a partner at the influential law firm Greenberg Traurig. She claims he tried to kiss her at their first meeting, a dinner, that took place before she officially started her

job.

“She was very weirded out,” a colleague of Dugan’s at the Recording Academy told HuffPost. Dugan confided in the colleague about the dinner soon after it happened, the person said, requesting that their name not be used for fear of retaliation.

Katz did not respond to a request for comment from HuffPost, but has denied her characterization of the dinner through a lawyer to other media outlets.

Dugan also claimed that the nonprofit vastly overpays its powerful outside attorneys, including the well-connected Katz, and that the process for nominating artists for the Grammys is flawed.

The Recording Academy tells a different story, and that story has shifted over the past week.

When Dugan was first placed on leave, the academy put out a statement claiming it was investigating complaints about Dugan’s treatment of a female member of the academy.

That complaint, a 1½-page document sent by a former executive assistant at the academy and reviewed by HuffPost, accuses Dugan of “bullying” and “hostility.” It contains no specific details of the behavior.

Yet that was apparently enough to spur the academy to action. “In light of concerns raised to the Recording Academy Board of Trustees, including a formal allegation of misconduct by a senior female member of the Recording Academy team, the Board has placed Recording Academy president and CEO Deborah Dugan on administrative leave, effective immediately,” the academy said in a statement last week. “The Board has also retained two independent third-party investigators to conduct independent investigations of the allegations.”

The misconduct complaint occurred in December, weeks before she was put on leave.

This week, the academy seemed to change the timeline, claiming that Dugan was put on leave only after her lawyers asked for several million dollars in order to be let out of her contract.

“Following that communication from Ms. Dugan’s attorney, Ms. Dugan was placed on administrative leave as we complete both of these ongoing investigations,” interim CEO Harvey Mason Jr. said in a statement Monday about the ongoing dust-up.

“As GRAMMY week is upon us, I truly hope we can focus our attention on the artists who’ve received nominations and deserve to be celebrated at this time of the year, and not give credence to unsubstantiated attacks on the Academy,” he said in the statement.

HuffPost obtained the misconduct complaint filed by Claudine Little, the former assistant to

Portnow who had been at the academy for 20 years. The letter, written by an outside law firm, is addressed to Katz and threatens a lawsuit.

“Ms. Dugan has exhibited open hostility toward Ms. Little — perhaps because, according to Ms. Dugan, Ms. Little is not ‘young’ and ‘cool.’” It says Dugan “belittled” and “demeaned” her but doesn’t provide examples.

Little claims in the letter that Dugan was trying to replace her as retaliation for her report of abusive behavior. But Dugan’s former colleague told HuffPost that the plan was always to shift Little to another role.

It’s unusual that a CEO would be put on leave based on such a thin complaint, and it’s equally strange that an investigation like this would take so long, said Dugan’s former colleague.

“This is all a sham,” they said. “Have you ever heard of a serious investigation of a former executive who has walked off the job because she can’t get along with the new CEO of the company?”

Little told Rolling Stone, “Ms. Dugan’s choice to litigate in the press and spread a false narrative about the Academy and me and my colleagues is regrettable, but it is also emblematic of Ms. Dugan’s abusive and bullying conduct while she served as the Academy’s President and CEO.”

The fact that the academy’s story has changed is telling, said Michael Willemin, a partner at Wigdor, the New York law firm representing Dugan. “Anytime a company starts changing the reasons it presents for taking an adverse action, it raises the specter that the reasons are false.”

Made To Feel Like A ‘Whore’

None of this was how it was supposed to go. Dugan stepped into her role just six months ago as part of the academy’s efforts to do better with women after a disastrous 2018 award show that left the hashtag GrammySoMale trending.

Her predecessor, Neil Portnow, was forced to step down last year after saying that if women wanted to get more acclaim, they needed to “step up.” (Worth noting: Portnow’s predecessor, Mike Greene, was ousted in 2002 in the wake of a sexual harassment scandal and amid accusations of financial wrongdoing.)

The outrage over Portnow’s comments, coming at the height of the Me Too movement, was intense. Entertainers including Pink, Sheryl Crow and Katy Perry, as well as powerful female industry executives, called for his resignation.

The Recording Academy then brought in Tina Tchen, who would later go on to become the president of TimesUp, to lead a task force aimed at improving things.

An investigation from Tchen's task force found the Recording Academy to be overwhelmingly dominated by men — men made up close to 75% of the nominating committees, according to the [report](#). The academy seemed to take the findings seriously, increasing the number of nominees in its four biggest categories to eight from four, and diversifying its voting body by adding more women, people of color and younger members.

Coulda sworn this is the same board that told women to "step up" Clearly what they really meant was stand down, turn a blind eye to problems, or be fired. [#DeborahDugan](#) truly stepped up & tried to make necessary changes & was shown the door. Been there, done that, got fired too. <https://t.co/xwm3qUln3x>

— Gabrielle Union (@itsgabrielleu) [January 18, 2020](#)

The Recording Academy hired Dugan in August 2019 with a mandate to work on improving diversity and inclusion. She was an industry pro who was the CEO of (Red), the nonprofit group founded by Bono, and prior to that an executive at EMI and Disney, and wanted to make more changes, particularly at the board level, to add diversity.

That's not how it worked out.

Dugan said her first clue came soon after she signed a three-year contract to lead the Recording Academy, at a dinner with Katz.

The general counsel propositioned her, she says in her complaint, called her "baby" and told her about his private plane and his money. At the end of their meeting, at which Dugan said she just tried to keep things professional, he tried to kiss her. Every time the two met one-on-one after that incident, Katz would tell Dugan she was pretty and referred to her as baby, according to her complaint.

Dugan told HuffPost that she'd been made to feel like a "whore" at that first meeting with Katz. She emphasized that she thought the point wasn't romantic but a test to see what she'd put up with.

Through a lawyer, Katz denied Dugan's recollection of the dinner, [The New York Times reported](#). He did not immediately respond to HuffPost's request for comment Thursday.

Then, More Trouble

The next sign of trouble for Dugan came at her very first board meeting — before she'd officially started her job. Dugan said she was whisked into a private room and told that Portnow, who was still CEO, was facing a rape allegation from a female artist. The day before, Dugan had been asked to sign off on Portnow's bonus. And a little before that, she'd also been asked to approve a deal in which he would stay on as a consultant for the academy for \$750,000 a year. She told HuffPost she rejected the consultation deal because she didn't "want him giving the impression that the female CEO can't do it alone."

Portnow has called the rape claims "ludicrous and untrue" and has said he didn't demand the \$750,000 fee.

A representative of the academy confirmed to HuffPost that there was indeed a rape allegation but that Portnow was cleared.

"Ms. Dugan was made aware of previous rape allegations, for which Mr. Portnow was cleared, and she did not do anything with the information," said the representative, who declined to be named.

Was Portnow put on leave while he was accused of rape? The representative of the academy did not know.

It was becoming clear to Dugan that there were deep problems at the academy, but she said she was already locked into the job. She had signed a contract. And, word of her hiring had leaked out quickly. She also had moved her teenage daughter and 91-year-old mother from New York to Los Angeles.

Plus, Dugan thought she could fix the organization.

"I don't know if I am nuts, but I thought I was the person that was going to get in and bring forth positive change," she said.

Dugan alleges in her complaint that the academy is supporting a boys' club of powerful men by paying out millions in fees to lawyers from outside firms for relatively small and uncomplicated legal work rather than using its own staff attorneys.

Dugan wanted to hire in-house lawyers, but the board rejected her bid to do so.

Katz, for example, is paid \$250,000 a year simply to be on call for the academy, according to the complaint — he then earns fees on top of that for any work performed and is paid a salary by his firm. Katz's firm, Greenberg Traurig, is a dominant player in the recording industry — and indeed the academy has paid out \$10.3 million in fees to the firm in the past four years, The New York Times reported.

Dugan also alleges that she was paid far less than her two male predecessors and that, when she raised the issue, “she was told she should be happy to be earning more than she had in her previous role,” according to the complaint. Dugan does not reveal those compensation numbers in the complaint. However, she earned \$537,000 a year at (Red), [The Associated Press](#) reported. In 2016, Portnow made \$1.7 million. He had been CEO since 2002.

A few artists have spoken up on Dugan’s behalf.

“I salute Deborah Dugan for her truth and courage to try and effect change. As always, a bunch of ignorant, testosterone-fueled, usually old white men stop progress and screw it up,” said hip-hop icon Chuck D. in an [Instagram post](#) after Dugan was put on leave. “Same old bullshit.”

Dugan never wanted to go public with these claims, she said. She had hoped to reform the academy from the inside. But that all changed in November, when the board got wind that Portnow’s former executive assistant Little had taken a leave of absence and accused Dugan of bullying her. Little sent her formal legal letter on Dec. 17.

The board used that complaint to strip Dugan of some of her powers. In early December, they told her that she could no longer hire or fire people without board approval, she said in her complaint.

Dugan — powers shackled — wanted to at least put her experiences somewhere on the record, hoping to prod the board into action.

On Dec. 22, she sent a letter to the academy’s human resources representative outlining these complaints — about pay, lawyer fees and Katz’s behavior.

Just three weeks after sending the letter, which is included in her complaint, the academy put Dugan on administrative leave. Dugan said she was assured the matter would be private.

Yet that same day, the Los Angeles Times published a story about how she was put on leave because of misconduct allegations — and the story quickly spread.

To push Dugan out right before the Grammys looks “clumsy,” said Rosemary Carroll, an industry lawyer and the founding partner of Carroll, Guido, Groffman, Cohen, Bar & Karalian, who’s been working in the music industry for 30 years.

The two weeks before the Grammys is the only time anyone pays attention to the Recording Academy, she said. “To do it in those two weeks, in this clumsy, awkward, obvious way, seemed lame to me.”

Carroll is one of the female executives who called for Portnow's ouster.

Even though Portnow left and the academy brought in Dugan, it seems it wasn't serious about making changes, she said.

"They just wanted her to come in like window dressing, it seems."

My Career Is Ruined

Dugan said the charges are "bogus," manufactured in order to push her out.

"There is a pattern of sexism and corruption in the Recording Academy," Dugan said. "There is no pattern in my 40 years of anyone going to HR complaining about me."

Dugan said her career is essentially "ruined," and she now assumes she'll never work again.

She won't be going to the Grammys on Sunday night. She said the academy yanked her tickets — and the tickets of all the industry contacts and friends she had invited.

Still, she'll watch the show on TV. "I worked really hard on this show, and it's going to be great."