

Discrimination

"This hurts," Fox News Channel anchor Kelly Wright declared. "This hurts," he repeated, while appearing at a press conference Wednesday with nine other current and former Fox News employees who are claiming systemic racial discrimination at the top-rated, right-leaning cable news outlet.

"We literally have a handful of black and Latino reporters, and only one black male anchor—which in 2017 shouldn't be the case," said Wright, one of very few black anchors at the network—and the only male African American who presides over his own Fox News show. (Juan Williams is a regular on *The Five*, and Charles Payne hosts a Fox Business Network show while frequently subbing on Neil Cavuto's Fox News program.) Wright added that the situation, along with the alleged denigration of minority employees toiling behind the scenes, is "inexcusable and indefensible" and the result of "systemic and institutional racial bias."

Wright, an ordained minister and gospel singer, was occasionally near tears and struggling to keep his composure as he explained why he has joined a dozen minority colleagues in a class action lawsuit filed Tuesday night in Bronx County's State Supreme Court against Fox News, its parent company 21st Century Fox, Fox News's general counsel, Dianne Brandi and its former comptroller, Judith Slater.

According to the court filing, Brandi and the executive in charge of the network's human resources department, Denise Collins, "permitted Slater and others to engage in abhorrent and blatant acts of race discrimination.

When met with complaints about the racist behavior, incredibly, black employees were told by Brandi and Collins that nothing could be done because Slater knew too much about senior executives, including former Chief Executive Officer Roger Ailes...former Chief Financial Officer Mark Kranz...and [Bill] O'Reilly."

The lawsuit claims that Brandi, for one, was told about Slater's misconduct as far back as 2008—an allegation Brandi has denied. Slater, according to the lawsuit, "ridiculed Black employees by mocking stereotyped speech" with various words and "forced Black employees to practice saying the words correctly in front of White employees"; demanded of black employees, "Why are all Black men women-beaters?"; "openly talked about her belief that all Chinese men have 'small penises'"; and "blatantly mocked the 'Black Lives Matter movement,' requiring plaintiff Tichaono Brown to drop by her office to say goodbye at the end of each workday, and responding by raising her hands in the air and quipping "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!"

In another incident detailed in the lawsuit, payroll employee Musfiq Rahman, described as "a dark-skinned Bangladeshi," accidentally blundered into Ailes's office—"which up to that point was open to the floor when his door was not closed"—while "looking for a group of other co-workers" on the second floor of Fox News headquarters.

"The fallout for Mr. Rahman's 'mistake' was swift and severe," the lawsuit continues. "Ailes was furious and his paranoia about being attacked came to the forefront. That same day, Ailes ordered

that a wall be constructed immediately in his personal office to act as a barrier to entry. This wall was an obvious attempt at preventing Black or dark-skinned employees from walking in unannounced and frightening Ailes.”

The suit recounts: “The following day, Mr. Rahman, along with a number of Black employees in the Accounts Receivable and Accounts Payable Departments, had their security passes to the second floor revoked. Thereafter, these humiliated employees were forced to get ‘escorts’ when they needed to speak to other employees on the second floor.”

Kelly Wright, meanwhile, claimed in the class action suit that he was repeatedly demeaned by O’Reilly because of his race. The court filing states that the Fox News star “refused to permit Mr. Wright to come on his show to discuss how America could focus on achieving racial conciliation in the midst of growing racial hostility [and] shockingly, he told Mr. Wright that he ‘should call up’ Ailes and current co-President William Shine...and ‘offer to sing the National Anthem at the Fox News Town Halls.’...

“On another occasion, Mr. Wright requested to appear on The O’Reilly Factor to discuss the racial divide in Ferguson, Missouri, and suggested showing viewers ‘Beyond the Dream,’ which is a series of positive stories about the African-American community and its contributions to the world. O’Reilly refused to run the ‘Beyond the Dream’ piece because it showed Blacks in ‘too positive’ a light. O’Reilly incredulously declared on his show: ‘I know Black American better than anyone.’”

A second racial discrimination complaint against the same defendants, plus Fox News accounting supervisor Susan Lovallo, was filed this week by former accounts payable employee Adasa Blanco in Manhattan federal court.

Get The Beast In Your Inbox!

By clicking "Subscribe," you agree to have read the and

The camera-ready airing of ugly allegations, including racially charged epithets and abuse allegedly committed by top Fox News executives, was staged by New York litigator Douglas Wigdor at his Manhattan law firm, in a conference room crowded with plaintiffs, attorneys and reporters, in order to increase public pressure on Fox News and 21st Century Fox.

“Rather than attempting to defend the indefensible, our collective hope is that Fox News will take a more conciliatory approach, given that the lawyers they have hired have a history of suing victims of discrimination,” Wigdor told the assembled journalists, wedged amid a thicket of cameras. “If they don’t” make significant changes in the corporate culture and offer his clients reasonable compensation, Wigdor added, “we will make sure they get the justice they deserve.”

Wigdor’s hope seems unlikely to be satisfied; the network responded in a statement: “FOX News and Dianne Brandi vehemently deny the race discrimination claims in both lawsuits. They are copycat complaints of the original one filed last month”—a reference to a racial discrimination complaint filed in late March by two black payroll department employees and later joined by a third. “We will vigorously defend these cases.”

That statement seemed to contradict the network’s earlier stance last month when it announced Slater’s abrupt firing with a public acknowledgement of her wrongdoing, along with the vow that “we take complaints of this nature very seriously” and “there is no place for inappropriate verbal remarks like this at Fox News.”

Indeed, according to a Fox News spokesperson, amid the turmoil and bad publicity since Ailes's ouster, the network has hired a new head of HR and implemented mandatory sensitivity training, which currently 96 percent of all employees have completed.

The powerful media kingdom—run by Rupert Murdoch and his sons Lachlan and James, the top executives at 21st Century Fox—has already been rocked in the past nine months by sensational lawsuits, the shocking sackings of Fox News founder Ailes and its biggest star, Bill O'Reilly, and revelations of a toxic corporate culture that has allegedly tolerated workplace sexual harassment and other forms of abuse during Fox News's two-decade existence.

What's more, federal prosecutors have spent months investigating Fox News, a subsidiary of a publicly traded company, for millions of dollars in possibly illegal payments to silence the sexual harassment victims of Ailes and Bill O'Reilly—a potential violation of laws protecting shareholders.

Former chief financial officer Kranz, who presumably knows where the bodies are buried, has reportedly been given immunity in the investigation.

Meanwhile, the mushrooming allegations have caught the attention of British communications regulators and could play a role in hindering 21st Century Fox's plans to take complete control of the profitable European television and internet platform, Sky PLC.

The pain being inflicted on the Murdoch empire is not likely to end anytime soon and, according to industry observers, could ultimately result in the exits of Brandi and Fox News co-president Bill Shine, Ailes's trusted lieutenants during his 20-year reign.

"Does this place need to be swept out with a shovel, or what?" said Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of the Yale School of Management, who has studied corporate governance at media companies, including 21st Century Fox.

Speaking of how executives there handled the scandals involving Ailes and O'Reilly, Sonnenfeld said: "Why did they tolerate it for so long, and are they somehow complicit? They were aware of the reports of the culture, and they were certainly aware of the lawsuits and the settlements, so what's the catalyst...? It isn't the conduct, it's the commerce."

As for Shine and Brandi, "those guys have to have a bull's eye painted on them," Sonnenfeld said. "They've lost their patron saint, they've lost their protector, there's no shield for them," he added, referring to Ailes. "Their days are numbered."

At Wednesday press conference, Kelly Wright told reporters:

"I am here reluctantly, because I am not against any man or woman at Fox News. I admire, like, and even love the people I work with and for. But I don't like what they do."

An experienced television journalist before he joined Fox News in 2003, Wright continues to host the outlet's Saturday program, *America's News Headquarters*, as he has for five years and did once again this past Saturday from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. and from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Asked why Fox News, as he repeatedly charged, regularly marginalizes African-Americans and other minority employees, Wright said: "I don't know. I don't know. I've asked, and I still don't know—except that somewhere along the line, there is an inbred way of thinking that the audience we

have attracted perhaps only wants to watch a certain color on air. We are better than this. We have to be better than this.”