

Deborah Dugan alleges sexual harassment and gender discrimination against Recording Academy

 [latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-01-21/grammys-deborah-dugan-recording-academy-sexual-](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-01-21/grammys-deborah-dugan-recording-academy-sexual-)

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Recently ousted Recording Academy President and CEO Deborah Dugan accused top entertainment lawyer Joel Katz of sexual harassment in a complaint against the academy her lawyers filed Tuesday with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

In the complaint, she also revealed an allegation she claims was known to the academy's Board of Trustees that her predecessor, Neil Portnow, raped an unidentified "foreign" female recording artist.

The two most explosive charges are part of a sweeping 44-page complaint, filed just five days ahead of Sunday's 62nd Grammy Awards ceremony. In the document, Dugan details "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 'boy's club' mentality and approach to governance at the Academy."

Portnow did not respond immediately to The Times' request for comment.

Dugan, 61, was placed on "administrative leave" last week by the academy's board, which hired her last year to succeed Portnow after 17 years at the helm. On Monday, board chairman and interim President/CEO Harvey Mason Jr. alleged in a memo to academy members that Dugan had created a "toxic and intolerable" working environment, was "abusive and bullying" to an assistant and that she demanded "millions" of dollars to withdraw her charges against the academy and resign.

Her EEOC complaint accuses the music industry advocacy organization responsible for the annual Grammy Awards of retaliating against her with "tactics reminiscent of those deployed by individuals defending [movie mogul] Harvey Weinstein."

BREAKING: Wigdor LLP has filed a Charge of Discrimination with the EEOC on behalf of Deborah Dugan against the Recording Academy (the Grammys). Below is a statement from her attorneys Douglas H. Wigdor and Michael J. Willemin. [#DeborahDugan #GRAMMYS pic.twitter.com/46CxukAT2V](#)

— Douglas Wigdor - Wigdor Law (@WigdorLaw) [January 21, 2020](#)

In her complaint, Dugan stated that she attended a business dinner with Katz, who serves as general counsel to the academy and is a former chair of the board, ahead of an academy board retreat at the Ritz Carlton in Laguna Niguel in May 2019. Throughout their dinner, “Mr. Katz acted extremely inappropriately ... repeatedly referred to Ms. Dugan as ‘baby’ ... commented on Ms. Dugan’s physical appearance, telling her multiple times that she was ‘very pretty’ and ... attempt[ed] to ‘woo’ Ms. Dugan into a romantic relationship.”

Further, Katz allegedly told Dugan “he was ‘very, very rich’ and suggested to Ms. Dugan that the two of them ‘spend time together’ and said that ‘traveling to my many homes could be something nice for us to share’.”

The EEOC filing added that “when dinner ended, Mr. Katz leaned in and attempted to kiss Ms. Dugan. Ms. Dugan quickly turned away, repulsed.”

Katz attorney Howard Weitzman issued a statement: “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. This dinner meeting was 2½ months before Ms. Dugan started her job. 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.”

In the complaint, Dugan said she learned of the allegation of rape against Portnow at the May 2019 board meeting.

“Ms. Dugan was hauled into a conference room and told — for the very first time — that a foreign recording artist (and member of the Academy) had accused Mr. Portnow of raping her following a performance that she gave at Carnegie Hall.

“The news was presented to Ms. Dugan as though the Board had just learned of the allegation,” the complaint states. “In reality, they were well aware of the allegation at the time Ms. Dugan agreed to take on the CEO position, but never told her.”

Dugan also says she was pressured by then-Chairman of the Board John Poppo to hire Portnow as a consultant for \$750,000 after his last contract terminated on July 31, 2019.

“As Ms. Dugan came to learn after she agreed to take the CEO position (for which she was paid substantially less than her two male predecessors), Mr. Portnow also allegedly raped a female recording artist, which was, upon information and belief, the real reasons his contract was not renewed,” the complaint states.

In a statement, a Recording Academy spokeswoman said: "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.

"Nonetheless," the statement continues, "we immediately launched independent investigations to review both Ms. Dugan's potential misconduct and her subsequent allegations.... Ms. Dugan was placed on administrative leave only after offering to step down and demanding \$22 million from the Academy...."

The female employee is widely believed to be Portnow's executive assistant Claudine Little.

Douglas Wigdor, Dugan's lawyer, responded Tuesday with a statement: "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...."

"[A]s alleged in the charge," the statement continued, "on the morning of the day she was put on leave, the Academy offered Ms. Dugan millions of dollars to drop all of this and leave the Academy. The Board Chair demanded an answer within the hour. When Ms. Dugan refused to accept and walk away, she was put on leave. The Academy claimed that Ms. Dugan was put on leave based on accusations made against her over a month prior that the Board knows very well are meritless. That is not a credible story."

Dugan stepped into the post as president and CEO on Aug. 1, succeeding Portnow.

He stepped down at the end of his contract after a public relations crisis that erupted after the 2018 Grammy Awards, when Portnow said it was time for women to "step up" to achieve parity with their male counterparts in response to a question about a male-heavy awards ceremony that year.

It unleashed a firestorm of backlash against Portnow, who apologized and tried to walk the comment back but still suffered calls for him to step down.

In the succeeding weeks, the academy announced the creation of a task force to examine "conscious and unconscious bias" within the music industry and the academy itself. Michelle Obama's former chief of staff Tina Tchen was hired to chair the group and quickly assembled a 15-woman, three-man panel that spent more than a year examining the academy's workings as an organization and the way it handles the annual Grammy Awards, from submissions through nominations to winners.

The group made 18 specific recommended changes in its final report issued in December. Among the key findings were lack of diversity among the academy's 25,000 professional, non-professional and student members as well as its 13,000 voting members, its 40-member board of trustees and the select nomination review committees that curate the recordings chosen to be nominated each year.

Dugan's EEOC filing includes lengthy descriptions of what she describes as corrupt voting practices behind the annual Grammy Awards.

"Rather than promoting a transparent nomination process," the complaint states, "the Board has decided to shroud the process in secrecy, and ultimately controls, in large part, who is nominated for Grammy Awards."

She alleges that nomination review committees that oversee various awards categories exert favoritism toward recordings from artists, record labels, management firms or other entities with whom they have business dealings.

"The Board also manipulates the nominations process to ensure that certain songs or albums are nominated when the producer of the Grammys (Ken Ehrlich) wants a particular song performed on the show," the complaint charges.

Grammy telecast executive producer Ehrlich could not be reached for comment.

Sunday's awards ceremony will take place at Staples Center. Lizzo, Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X are among the artists vying for trophies.