

Recording Academy fires embattled CEO Deborah Dugan, but she's not going quietly

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By Bethonie
Butler

The Recording Academy officially fired its chief executive, Deborah Dugan, on Monday, just over a month after she alleged gender discrimination, sexual harassment and unequal pay at the organization behind the Grammy Awards.

Dugan, the academy's first female CEO and president, was placed on administrative leave in January, just days before this year's Grammy ceremony, after what the organization called "a formal allegation of misconduct by a senior female member" of the academy. Dugan responded to the suspension — less than six months into her tenure — by filing a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, claiming the academy had retaliated against her after she emailed a senior human resources executive to express concern that the organization was operating under a " 'boys' club' mentality."

The drama escalated into a battle between the 63-year-old nonprofit organization, which has been criticized in recent years for its treatment of black and female artists, and Dugan, who had once pledged to lead the academy "into the future."

The academy informed its members of Dugan's firing in a letter Monday, citing "consistent management deficiencies and failures." The academy said the decision to fire Dugan was made after "two exhaustive, costly independent investigations" and involved interviews with 37 witnesses.

In a statement, Dugan said the academy had not interviewed her as part of the investigations and the reviews failed to address claims she made in her EEOC complaint regarding alleged conflicts of interest and voting irregularities Dugan said were particularly disadvantageous to female artists and artists of color. On the eve of the Grammys, the academy denied voting irregularities in a letter from its board chair, Harvey Mason Jr., who has served as interim president and CEO since Dugan was placed on leave.

"Instead of trying to reform the corrupt institution from within, I will continue to work to hold accountable those who continue to self-deal, taint the Grammy voting process and discriminate against women and people of color," Dugan said in her statement. "Artists deserve better. To me, this is the real meaning of 'stepping up.'"

The "stepping up" reference was a dig at Dugan's predecessor, Neil Portnow, who led the organization for 17 years. Amid outcry over the lack of female winners at the 2018 Grammys, Portnow drew controversy for saying women in the industry needed to "step up"

if they wanted to win more awards. In her EEOC filing, Dugan said the misconduct allegation had been leveled against her by Portnow's former executive assistant, who had accused Dugan of maintaining an "abusive and bullying" workplace environment.

Dugan's filing also alleged the reason Portnow's contract had not been renewed was that he had been accused of rape by a female recording artist. (Portnow said in a statement to media outlets that "the allegations of rape are ludicrous, and untrue."). Dugan also accused prominent entertainment lawyer Joel Katz, who serves as the academy's general counsel, of sexually harassing her during a business meeting. Katz denied the allegation through his attorney, telling Deadline he "categorically and emphatically denies her version of that evening."

The EEOC, citing confidentiality, would not comment on whether Dugan's firing would have any impact on how her complaint moves forward. On Tuesday, Dugan filed a supplemental charge with the agency, alleging that the academy "has subjected her to repeated, ongoing and egregious retaliation" since she filed her initial complaint.

Attorneys for Dugan said in a statement that "the academy's decision to terminate Ms. Dugan and immediately leak that information to the press further demonstrates that it will stop at nothing to protect and maintain a culture of misogyny, discrimination, sexual harassment, corruption and conflicts of interest.

"The decision is despicable and, in due course, the Academy, its leadership and its attorneys will be held accountable under the law," the statement said.

In its letters to members, the academy said it had participated in some settlement discussions at Dugan's request but concluded "not removing Ms. Dugan from the organization at this time would have caused us to compromise our values."

Tammy Hurt, vice chair of the Recording Academy's board of trustees, echoed that sentiment in a statement. "The investigation overwhelmingly confirmed the serious complaints that had been lodged against her by a multitude of Academy staff members," Hurt said. "The damage she has caused this organization is truly heartbreaking."

The academy's letter notes the organization will soon begin searching for a president and CEO.

"We realize that we are not perfect, but we want you to know that our attention and energy will remain squarely on you and on the positive changes we are making together," the organization told its members. "We will not be distracted from that."