

Wellspring Worker Told To Stay Quiet About Rape, Suit Says

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By **Vin Gurrieri**

Law360 (July 13, 2020, 8:53 PM EDT) -- The CEO of private equity firm Wellspring Capital Management LLC told a then-employee he'd "destroy" her career after she accused his son of sexual assault, she claimed in a recent state suit alleging violation of New York City's law against gender-motivated violence.

Taylor Lawrence sued Christopher Dawson — son of Wellspring CEO William Dawson — alleging the younger Dawson raped her at his father's apartment in 2014. The July 9 suit, which does not name either William Dawson or Wellspring Capital as defendants, alleges violation of the Victims of Gender-Motivated Violence Protection Act.

In her complaint, Lawrence claims that the elder Dawson acknowledged the alleged sexual assault by telling her his son had boasted about it in vulgar terms, to which she responded that she never consented to the encounter.

On another occasion after Lawrence confronted William Dawson about the alleged rape in front of another Wellspring managing partner, Dawson purportedly responded by saying, "'I will destroy you. I will ruin you,' if she continued to raise such claims," the complaint alleges. The threat is why she didn't pursue claims sooner, Lawrence claims.

A source familiar with the situation told Law360 that Dawson has elected to take a temporary leave of absence from his role as CEO. Bloomberg reported Monday that Dawson will take leave and that Wellspring is conducting an internal investigation of the allegations raised in the suit.

Meanwhile, the Dawson family said in a statement issued to Law360 that the alleged incident between Lawrence and Christopher Dawson didn't occur, calling her complaint "pure fiction intended as a shakedown," while adding that they will "defend aggressively against it."

"The alleged event — said to have happened more than five years ago between a then 18-year old boy and a then 34-year old employee of the firm — never happened," the family said in its statement. "Indeed, the employee, who worked at the firm for more than three years after the alleged event, never once mentioned it to the Dawsons, anyone in human resources or the police. The first time we heard anything about this was in June 2020."

Lawrence worked at Wellspring for nearly eight years until January 2018. She had been the head of marketing and investor relations, according to her complaint.

The incident in question occurred in late 2014. After William Dawson didn't arrive for a planned meeting with Lawrence at a bar near his Manhattan apartment, she walked to his apartment to ask him to come downstairs, according to the complaint.

Instead, a doorman informed her that "Mr. Dawson" had given approval for her to go up to the apartment. When she got there, she allegedly encountered only Christopher Dawson, who told her that his father was asleep and convinced her to have a drink while she waited for her cab to arrive, the complaint alleges.

But Lawrence claims the drink Christopher Dawson gave her was drugged, which rendered her "incapable of lawfully consenting" to any sexual activity and unable to physically resist him, according to the suit.

"As the complaint ... makes clear, Christopher Dawson appears to believe that his privilege and wealth allow him to behave with impunity," Lawrence's lawyers said in a release. "We look forward to using the Gender Motivated Violence Act to hold him accountable for raping Ms. Lawrence so that she can begin the process of moving forward with her life."

The law creates a private civil cause of action for any person who alleges they were injured by a gender-motivated "crime of violence" as defined in the statute against the person alleged to have committed the act.

According to Lawrence's suit, Christopher Dawson currently works for a real estate company.

Lawrence is represented by Douglas H. Wigdor and David E. Gottlieb of Wigdor LLP.

Christopher Dawson is represented by A. Michael Weber of Littler Mendelson PC.

The case is Taylor Lawrence v. Christopher Dawson in the Supreme Court for the State of New York, County of New York. The case number was not immediately available.