

SoulCycle Is The Subject Of A Pregnancy Discrimination Suit

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Molly Longman Last Updated August 12, 2020, 8:00 AM

SoulCycle is being sued by a former employee for pregnancy discrimination, according to a complaint obtained by Refinery29 on Tuesday. The plaintiff is Jordan Kafenbaum, the former senior director of instructor programming and talent management at the company, who was fired on April 27, 2020, 32 days after giving birth, the complaint says. Kafenbaum is suing the cycling institution; its interim chief executive officer, Sunder Reddy; and its former chief people officer, Adrienne Gemperle. She says the organization is guilty of “blatant pregnancy discrimination and retaliation.”

Kafenbaum had been overseeing almost 400 instructors, and her boss allegedly planned to promote her — before she announced she was pregnant. The lawsuit states that Gemperle shared news of the pregnancy widely at a conference with more than 100 employees in attendance. Gemperle, discussing a newly implemented paternal leave policy, allegedly said, “Jordan Kafenbaum’s mother actually just called to thank me for changing our policy because when we did Jordan finally got pregnant!” according to the complaint.

Kafenbaum confronted the CPO, who claimed it was just a joke, the complaint says. Kafenbaum says after the incident, she was retaliated against and was excluded from big meetings before she went on maternity leave. Just four weeks into her leave, and amid the coronavirus pandemic, Kafenbaum was told she was being let go. Gemperle has not responded to Refinery29’s request for comment.

The complaint alleges that Kafenbaum was told at time of termination the decision was made based on the coronavirus, but was also given multiple “inconsistent excuses” including “department re-organization, performance concerns, position elimination, and, finally, a horrific, global pandemic.”

The suit says that the fitness chain let go three other people shortly after or before giving birth this year. The complaint says that any claim made by the company that all four of these firings happened “because of financial concerns resulting from the pandemic is undercut by the fact that, since closing its fitness studios in March 2020, SoulCycle has continued to pay its instructors 75% of their salaries, which has cost SoulCycle hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

A SoulCycle spokesperson tells Refinery29: “SoulCycle offers paid parental leave for all full-time employees. Ms. Kafenbaum was unfortunately laid off as part of a necessary restructuring due to the impact of COVID-19. She was paid for the entirety of her maternity

leave and offered severance." When Refinery29 reached out, Jeanne M. Christensen, Kafenbaum's lawyer, stated Kafenbaum was "fired," not laid off.

The complaint describes a harsh working environment at the company, detailing incidents of alleged discrimination and sexual harassment. It mentions an incident in which Kafenbaum says she witnessed Reddy gesture "with his hands and mouth what is commonly known to reference to a blow job." The complaint also alleges that the former SoulCycle CEO Melanie Whelan previously told an employee that: "Paternity leave is for pussies."

In their statement to Refinery29, SoulCycle did not comment directly on Reddy's behavior. Melanie Whelan did not provide Refinery29 with a statement before press time.

"The company strongly disagrees with the accusations contained in Kafenbaum's claim and intends to vigorously defend itself," the SoulCycle spokesperson said.

These allegations come shortly after the company was called out by several former workers for taking advantage of its employees of color, using their images as "marketing materials" instead of making a real commitment to supporting Black Lives Matter and racial justice. "Whether SoulCycle marginalized and subjected female employees to 'less than' treatment because of their skin color is directly relevant to whether senior management similarly fostered or allowed bias to exist against female employees that became pregnant," the complaint reads.

"SoulCycle pitches a brand of 'tolerance and equality,'" Christensen said in an email statement sent to Refinery29. "But there is nothing inclusionary about firing a female employee because she became pregnant. This suggests allegiance to the bottom line over a 'safe community.' Recent allegations about a lack of commitment to diversity and inclusion by several female instructors creates even more questions about SoulCycle's culture."

Last year, SoulCycle took a public hit when it was revealed that one of its major investors Stephen Ross hosted a fundraiser for President Donald Trump. Many customers quit. Kafenbaum filed her charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and said that her treatment violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended by the the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1974.