

An exec was startup Afresh's first Black-woman VP. A year later, she's suing her former employer over claims of discrimination.

[businessinsider.com/afresh-racial-discrimination-lawsuit-eeoc-2022-5](https://www.businessinsider.com/afresh-racial-discrimination-lawsuit-eeoc-2022-5)

Rosalie Chan 1 hour ago

Jenna Wills.

Marina Zarya

- Jenna Wills, a former vice president at Afresh, filed a lawsuit against the company in April.
- Wills, who is Black, alleges she faced racial discrimination at the grocery-software startup.
- An Afresh spokesperson said that Wills' race was not taken into account in her termination.

When Jenna Wills joined Afresh in June 2021, she was inspired by the startup and what she described as its "incredible" mission to use artificial intelligence to help grocery stores order just the right amount of inventory and reduce food waste.

A veteran of companies like Credit Karma and Time Inc., she was excited to step up as Afresh's new vice president and head of people. Afresh was founded in 2017 by the Stanford alumni Matt Schwartz, Nathan Fenner, and Volodymyr Kuleshov. It has raised over \$45 million from investors like Food Retail Ventures, Innovation Endeavors, and Baseline Ventures, and it has about 100 employees.

The excitement didn't last long, Wills told Insider, and she was terminated from Afresh in March after less than a year with the company. In April, she filed a lawsuit against her former employer with San Francisco's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission office. She said she felt the lawsuit was her only choice to bring awareness to the discrimination she alleges she experienced and make Afresh a better workplace for everybody.

"What I hope to come out of this is awareness, a heightened consciousness, and putting others first," Wills said. "I want anyone currently at Afresh and anyone there in the future, no matter what their identity is, to be their whole selves, to be honored for their merit, and to exist within a discrimination-, harassment-free workplace."

An Afresh spokesperson said the company had a third-party investigator look into Wills' concerns. The spokesperson said the investigator concluded that there was no indication that Wills' race was taken into account with respect to the termination of her employment or allegations of mistreatment.

'An uphill battle'

Wills said she quickly realized that working at Afresh was going to be "an uphill battle."

She said she found herself as one of the very few people of color at the company and the only Black woman in top leadership. The company's demographics contributed to what she said was a bad situation as she clashed with colleagues and upper management.

On one occasion, she said a company cofounder publicly humiliated her by falsely accusing her in front of the management team of not being able to do her job. Another time, she said one of her fellow vice presidents told her outright that he was uninterested in partnering with her and questioned how she got the job in the first place.

"That conversation was particularly demeaning and dismissive," Wills told Insider.

The Afresh spokesperson said the company launched what it calls its diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging committee two years ago, which has since implemented diversity-focused events and a focus on equity and inclusivity in hiring, retention, and promotion.

When the committee started, the company was only 25% female. At that time, there was only one Hispanic employee and no Black employees, the spokesperson said. Now 43% of the company identifies as a race other than white, and 45% of the company is female. Out of its 100 employees, 15 are Black or Hispanic. The leadership team is all white, and one-third are women, the spokesperson said.

Within the first month of being there, Wills said she found that many of her colleagues were not interested in working with her and that the ideas she brought forward at meetings never seemed to "get across the finish line." The Afresh spokesperson said that some of her ideas were never carried out for legitimate business reasons.

Wills said colleagues also told her that the management team was "scared" to speak with her and that it seemed that she didn't care about her job, a notion that plays into stereotypes about Black people. She said her colleagues frequently canceled meetings with her at the last minute.

"I pride myself in respecting other people's time," Wills said. "It was very frequent, and I felt my time was disrespected."

Wills isn't the first to speak up over claims of discrimination in tech

Wills is not the only person who has spoken up with allegations of racial discrimination in tech. Across the industry, companies struggle to hire and retain people of color despite public statements in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Underrepresented groups like Black and Latino people make up only single-digit percentages of the workforce at many major tech companies.

For her part, Wills said improvement at Afresh and across the industry would take "humility and collective efforts." Tech companies can make strides in the right direction by not only hiring more employees of color but also bringing them in at a leadership or management level, she said. Companies that want to help can also introduce training on unconscious bias, she added.

"We can continue to create psychologically safe places where people can be honest about the experiences they're having, and we can make it safe for folks of unique identities and allies alike to keep working on it," Wills said. "I think it will be a journey for a long time, but it's not impossible."