

TRENTON TIMES (1/27/10)

Adult company must pay \$500,000 for harassment

By For The Times

January 27, 2010, 9:13PM

TRENTON — A jury Wednesday ordered a Hightstown adult novelties company to pay \$500,000 in punitive damages to an ex-employee who was fired after complaining of sexual harassment on the job.

East Coast News must pay Doreen Longo for firing her in 2006 after she complained that a co-worker was making sexual remarks and threatening her with physical violence.

"We had evidence that the defendants through the highest level of the company retaliated against her for making a complaint," said Andrew Dwyer, Longo's attorney.

"The president of the company yelled and screamed at her and disciplined her for the first time in the four years she'd worked there. He accused her of saying bad things about the company."

The company did nothing to investigate the sexual harassment complaint, and Longo was subsequently fired when she complained that she was being retaliated against, her attorney argued.

On Monday, jurors awarded Longo \$150,000 for lost wages and emotional distress.

John MacDonald, the attorney representing East Coast News, says the company will ask the judge to set aside both verdicts.

"We firmly believe the jury misunderstood the law," MacDonald said.

The company will ask the judge to dismiss the case or order a new trial, he said.

Dwyer said he believes the financial punishment will persuade East Coast News

to properly address any future complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace.

"The employees of (East Coast News) will never have to worry that what happened to Doreen Longo will happen to them," Dwyer said. "The company won't dare face the wrath of another jury."

In a one-day trial to determine punitive damages, financial records showed the company had \$20 million in assets and a substantial income, Dwyer said.

By law, jurors must consider a company's wealth when setting punitive damages, Dwyer said.

"You have to have a punitive award that's large enough to get their attention," he said. "It has to sting a little. It has to hurt."

In a discrimination and hostile work environment suit against East Coast News and its affiliated Pleasure Productions and International Video Distributors, Longo said her bosses ignored her repeated complaints that a co-worker was sexually harassing her and threatening her with violence.

Longo filed a formal complaint with corporate higher-ups in February 2006 and was immediately disciplined for poor work performance. She was fired two months later after complaining about the retaliation. At the trial, she testified that her bosses told her she was being let go because she had lodged the complaints.

By special writer Lisa Coryell.