Woman Sues Chocolates Shop over Hiring Bias

JOE MANDAK, Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — A woman has sued a chocolates-and-milkshake shop, saying she was fired for hiring a black woman instead of a white, "all-American girl."

Officials with Edward Marc Chocolatier, which does business as The Milk Shake Factory on Pittsburgh's South Side, didn't address the specific claims made in the federal lawsuit filed Tuesday by 43-year-old Denise Beloncis, but they said they believe the litigation will be "successfully resolved."

The Pittsburgh woman said she was fired in November 2012, about three months after she was hired as the store's general manager.

The plaintiff claims a supervisor specifically told her not to hire men and to hire "the all-American girl," which the lawsuit described as blonde, blue-eyed and college-educated — preferably at Duquesne University, a Catholic school in the city.

Beloncis' attorney, Sam Cordes, said she was fired when she instead hired a young black woman.

"As a nation we have determined that a person should not pay a price for opposing race or sex discrimination," Cordes said. "Here, the price Ms. Beloncis paid for doing the right thing was her job. The law does not allow an employer to charge that kind of price."

According to the company's website, the family-owned business was founded about 90 years ago by immigrants who have passed down recipes for handcrafted chocolates that the founders "carried with them from the family kitchen back in Greece."

The company in a statement released Tuesday night said the "claim is unfounded" and expressed confidence that the case "will be successfully vetted and resolved."

"It is our company policy to hire the best workforce available, regardless of age, race, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, culture and/or sexual orientation, and we will continue to carry out that policy."

In addition to The Milk Shake Factory, the company has an online shop, a chocolate factory in nearby Trafford and another retail store in Arlington, Va. The company also has a sales office in Washington, D.C., where officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Cordes said he doesn't know the status of the woman Beloncis hired.

The lawsuit contends Beloncis was fired on Nov. 23, 2012, because "she hired the

people she felt were a good fit based on their employment history, references and availability."

Cordes filed similar lawsuits on behalf of workers at a Panera Bread store in Mount Lebanon, an upscale Pittsburgh suburb.

In that case, the plaintiffs were a black worker and the white manager who was allegedly fired for refusing to keep the worker in the kitchen instead of letting the man work the cash register. The Ohio franchisee who ran that store denied wrongdoing but agreed to pay $76,000 to settle the litigation two years ago.

"Our discrimination laws mean nothing if an employer can fire an employee for objecting to race or sex discrimination and for refusing to make racial and gender-based employment decisions," Cordes said.

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