

Suit alleges manager was racially harassed

BY JILL HOCKMAN
STAFF WRITER

A Detroit woman who is suing a local property management company says she was harassed by residents of the Farmington Hills apartment complex where she lived and worked, fired from her job as property manager and then replaced by a white man — all because she is black.

In the lawsuit, filed earlier this month in Oakland County Circuit Court, Michelle Hawkins claims Village Green Management Company, a Farmington Hills-based corporation that manages nearly 100 properties throughout metro Detroit and the Midwest, did nothing to stop the racial harassment aimed at her last year by residents of Village Green of Farmington Hills.

But Village Green spokesman Tim Smith called the allegations "entirely untrue." He said Hawkins was not fired, but quit her job as manager of the company's Farmington Hills apartment complex, located just off Haggerty between 13 and 14 Mile roads.

"She voluntarily left the company," Smith said. "She turned in her keys and quit." Smith also said Village Green does not tolerate racial discrimination of any kind.

Checking the records

Village Green officials are currently combing through records regarding Hawkins' employment with the company, Smith said.

"We're trying to review all the information," Smith said. "We have an incredible track record of equal opportunity and equal housing . . . We are entirely intolerant of (discrimination)," he said.

The civil suit — lodged against Hawkins' former supervisor, Village Green Property Management Company and Village Green of

Farmington Hills — asks for a jury trial and damages in excess of \$10,000. Pretrial hearings on the case have not yet been set.

According to the lawsuit, Hawkins was hired to work at another Village Green property in 1993, and was promoted to manage the Farmington Hills complex less than a year later in March 1994.

With the exception of grounds keepers, Hawkins was the only black employee, and about 95 percent of residents were white, the suit states. Her compensation included a free apartment in the 240-unit complex, so she moved in.

The lawsuit claims that about two months later, complex residents circulated a petition seeking the removal of Hawkins from Village Green. The suit claims residents said the purpose of the petition was "to get that black bitch out of here." But Smith said Village Green has no record of that petition being filed.

Allege racial incidents

In December, racial slurs were written on Hawkins' apartment door, her car was damaged and more racial slurs were left on her voice mail, the suit claims. But Smith said Village Green officials were not told of the alleged property damage until after Hawkins resigned.

The suit also claims on the same day the voice mail messages were left, a resident entered Hawkins' office and shouted racial slurs. Hawkins claims she called the police and then put the resident on a speaker phone with her manager.

The lawsuit alleges that when the resident directed more racial comments regarding Hawkins to the supervisor, the supervisor said others had complained about Hawkins, and that "they were trying to get rid of her." The supervisor and resident met later,

but Hawkins was not invited to the meeting, according to the suit. The suit claims that the supervisor later told Hawkins the situation was handled properly, and that she wouldn't change the way she dealt with it if it happened again. Hawkins alleges she was fired a few days later, while Smith insists she quit.

Trial by media?

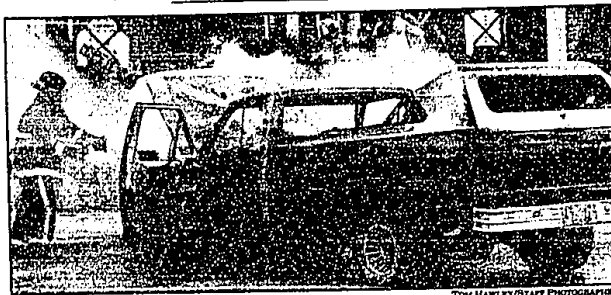
Hawkins' lawyer, Cherie Ritter, said her client continued to live in the complex until last spring when she landed another job. Hawkins has since quit that job, she said, and now works part time at the Fox Theater in Detroit and is a full-time student at Wayne State University.

Village Green officials accused Hawkins of trying the case in the media. "While Ms. Hawkins chooses the media to pursue her baseless and disturbing claim, we will respect the court as the appropriate place to bring forth all the facts," Village Green president Jonathan Holtzman wrote in a statement released Wednesday. "It is a disservice and gives undue weight to illegitimate claims to have print and broadcast media used for the financial motivations of those who would distort and misrepresent the truth. . . . We look forward to the opportunity to make our case in a trial in which all of the facts will be brought forward."

Village Green Property Management Company was founded in 1919, and currently manages properties in several southeastern Michigan communities, including West Bloomfield, Waterford, Southfield and Troy. The company employs some 1,100 workers, Smith said.

Village Green does not track its residents by race, according to Smith. "Our properties tend to follow the racial makeup of the community at large," he said.

Where's there's smoke . . .



TOM HAWLEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

There's a truck fire: Traffic at Grand River and Mooney moved slowly Wednesday morning as Farmington firefighters extinguished a pickup truck fire in the parking lot of The Winery building. A Detroit man said he was driving east on Grand River with his wife when the truck wouldn't accelerate. He said the engine was smoking when he pulled into the parking lot to check the problem, and the couple exited the truck seconds before it was engulfed in flames. Firefighters extinguished the blaze in about 10 minutes, according to police. No injuries were reported, but the 1984 Ford pickup was destroyed.

Police calls from page 4A

INDECENT EXPOSURES

A Farmington Hills woman, 57, told Hills police that a "light-skinned man" wearing a stocking cap and dark jacket, pulled down his pants and began to dance on her property on Wingate at 7 a.m. Nov. 21. He then "mooned" the woman before leaving on foot.

A Farmington woman told Farmington police a man stopped in the drive near her condominium, dropped his pants and began to masturbate on Nov. 22. He left in a forest green colored vehicle and returned later and repeated his

actions. The man is described as a thin-built white male wearing tan pants.

DRUGS Farmington Hills police arrested a Pontiac man, 25, for possession of two Baggies of marijuana after he was pulled over for a traffic stop on Middlebelt at the Shell station at 4:30 p.m. Nov. 21.

PROWLING Farmington Hills police arrested a Detroit man, 46, for prowling at the Timberidge Apartments on Timberidge in Farmington Hills at 12:01 a.m. Nov. 22.

FRAUD

A Farmington Hills woman, 27, told Hills police that she paid a Highland Park man, 30, \$1,200 to buy her a car Sept. 22. The man has not contacted her at her Gateway Apartments residence since.

AUTO THEFTS

A \$20,000 gray 1992 Chevy Lumina was stolen from the Clarion Hotel on 12 Mile in Farmington Hills Nov. 23.

A black 1995 Jeep Cherokee was stolen from the 7-Eleven store on Farmington Nov. 23.

Jaycees plan tree lighting Dec. 2

The Farmington Area Jaycees will present the group's 10th annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec.

2, at the Farmington Historical Museum, 33905 Grand River, Farmington.

There will be caroling by

candlelight and hot chocolate will be served. Special guests will be Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. The public is invited to the free event.

Sentencing from page 1A

ing marijuana with intent to deliver) in exchange for a maximum sentence of two years probation, required inpatient drug treatment and a \$1,000 fine, according to prosecutor Renee Gucciardo. If a judge later decided to level a heavier sentence, Willer had the option to withdraw his plea, Gucciardo said.

The maximum sentence for a drug manufacturing conviction is 15 years in prison and a \$1 mil-

lion fine, Gucciardo said. In Willer's case, the Oakland County Probation Department recommended less than that: a year in jail followed by two years of probation. It was Willer's only drug offense.

On Tuesday, prosecutor Len Gorz asked Callahan to stick to the probation department's suggestion. But Willer's attorney, Barry Resnick, told Callahan that Willer has been participating in

an outpatient drug treatment program three times a week for the last four months. Willer also has a job, Resnick said.

"Is this in lieu of making beer in your basement?" Callahan asked. Willer said yes, and that only about 16 marijuana plants were in his house at the time of the police raid.

In addition to his sentence of two years probation, Willer is also required to pay some \$12,000 in

court costs.

Since Willer's arrest, Oakland County Narcotics Enforcement Team members had speculated that Willer's \$130,000 house might be confiscated because marijuana had been grown there.

But Mark Menghini, Lt. Commander of the NET unit, said officials have decided not to go after the house because it was not economical to pursue it in drug forfeiture proceedings.

An Old Fashioned Holiday Experience



DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM

A Tradition of Fine Shops & Galleries
Art & Antiques • Unique Restaurants & Cafes



FREE PARKING IN ALL CITY STRUCTURES DECEMBER 10TH THROUGH 24TH AFTER 6 PM

GIFT CERTIFICATES available by phone

BUY 3 SHIRTS PAY FOR 5

Executive Custom
Shirtmakers & Tailors, Inc.

221 South Boulevard Ave. • Birmingham 35205
And south of the Birmingham Turnpike
(313) 545-5682

CHILDHOOD IS A VERY SPECIAL TIME



Make the Most of It With Our Lovely Traditional Toys & Learning Activities

Just expanded to Offer You the BEST Selection of:

• Brilo • Playmobil • Breyer Horses • Dolls in Love or Collect • Dollhouses • Trains • Science • Arts & Crafts • Games & Puzzles • Infant & Preschool • Puzzles

3947 W. 13 Mile • Berkley (near the intersection of 13 Mile & 3947 W.)
(810) 543-3115
Mon-Sat 10-6:30 PM Sun 10-5



GET PERSONAL WITH YOUR WATERFORD CRYSTAL

Please join us as we welcome Sean Sweeney, Waterford Crystal Artisan, to our store. He will answer any questions you may have and sign your Waterford Crystal purchases made during this event.

Thursday, November 30
11 am - 2 pm., Birmingham
4 pm - 6 pm., Rochester
Fine China

Jacobson's

HOLIDAY HOURS

335 W. MAPLE RD., BIRMINGHAM
MONDAY - SATURDAY, 9:30 AM TO 6 PM
SUNDAY, NOON TO 5 PM
PHONE: 844-8800 • FAX: 848-8087
GREAT OAKS MALL • ROCHESTER
MONDAY - SATURDAY, 10 AM TO 6 PM
SUNDAY, NOON TO 6 PM