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Court Rules for Cleaners In \$54 Million Pants Suit

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By [Henri E. Cauvin](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, June 26, 2007; Page A01

The D.C. administrative law judge who sued his neighborhood dry cleaners for \$54 million over a pair of lost pants found out yesterday what he's going to get.

Nothing.

Hardly a surprise, the verdict was nonetheless a media spectacle of the first order.

Journalists from around the world descended on a strip mall in far Northeast Washington for one more news conference and a last look at the place where it all began between the proprietors of Custom Cleaners, Soo and Jin Chung, and a judge named [Roy Pearson](#).



VIDEO | The Chung family holds a press conference after a judge rules that the man who sued them for \$54 million for a pair of lost pants will get nothing.

It was the case that people couldn't stop talking about, and yesterday, the judge who heard it, [Judith Bartnoff](#), finally had her say, rejecting Pearson's claim that he was defrauded by the Chungs and their "Satisfaction Guaranteed" sign.

"A reasonable consumer would not interpret 'Satisfaction Guaranteed' to mean that a merchant is required to satisfy a customer's unreasonable demands or to accede to demands that the merchant has reasonable grounds to dispute," Bartnoff wrote in a 23-page ruling, adding that Pearson "is not entitled to any relief whatsoever."

"Obviously, it's a great day for the Chungs, and honestly, it's a great day for American justice," the couple's lead attorney, Christopher Manning, said outside the Chungs' shop, on Bladensburg Road NE.

Bartnoff ordered Pearson to pay the Chungs' court costs -- likely to be a few thousand dollars -- to

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cover fees for filings, transcripts and similar expenses. But even bigger troubles loom. She said she will consider making Pearson also pay the couple's attorneys' fees arising from the two-year legal battle. With the legal costs likely to exceed \$100,000, however, the Chungs aren't counting on Pearson being able to pay, Manning said.

And with good reason. Up for reappointment this year, Pearson could have a hard time keeping his \$96,000-a-year job if Bartnoff finds him at fault for his pursuit of the case. While awaiting a decision on his reappointment, Pearson is not hearing cases. He did not respond to e-mails seeking comment yesterday.

No one, not even Pearson, argued that his pants were actually worth \$54 million. They were part of a Hickey Freeman suit that cost slightly more than \$1,000, and letting out the waist, as Pearson had asked the cleaners to do, was a \$10.50 job.

But this case -- decried by the plaintiffs' attorneys and the defense bar -- was, to Pearson, about far more than the pair of pants. He might yet appeal.

According to Pearson, the litigation is about safeguarding the rights of every consumer in the District who might fall prey to signs like those once posted in Custom Cleaners. Satisfaction was in fact not guaranteed, Pearson argued, and his own experience put the lie to the supposed promise.

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The trouble came in spring 2005. Pearson, who had been out of work for about three years, had just been appointed to be an administrative law judge. He had gained weight, and he realized he needed to have his suit pants let out.

On May 3, he brought in a pair of pants that he planned to wear three days later. But on May 5, they were not ready, and the day after, they were nowhere to be found.

What happened next is perhaps the most significant factual dispute.

Pearson claims that the pants still weren't at the cleaners May 7 and that [Soo Chung](#) promised to keep looking. When he returned a week later, Chung tried to give him what she said were the missing trousers. But Pearson said they were not the pants he had left to be altered. Not only was the pattern different, but the pants proffered as his also had, of all things, cuffs. Only once in his adult life, he said, had he worn cuffed pants, and never, he suggested, would he have so altered his treasured Hickey Freeman suit.

Pearson wrote the Chungs, demanding \$1,150 to buy a new suit. When the Chungs did not respond, Pearson swung into action, filing a lawsuit that would eventually make him the talk of the town and fodder for late-night comedy.

In her ruling, Bartnoff said that Pearson failed to prove that the pants Soo Chung offered him were not his. The judge suggested that he might have been mixed up about what he brought in.

"It certainly is plausible that the pants on the hanger with his blue and burgundy pinstriped suit jacket were not the pants that matched the jacket," Bartnoff wrote, "even if Mr. Pearson



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assumed that they were."

And he did, insisting as much right up until the end of his trial.

He initially sought as much as \$67 million in damages, scaling back the demand shortly before trial. During the past two years, he rejected offers to settle, first for \$3,000, then for \$4,600 and finally for \$12,000.

The judge who had been handling the case until this year headed off Pearson's efforts to turn the suit into a sort of sweeping class-action and tried to rein in Pearson's "excessive" demands for documents. But the judge found he could not simply dismiss all of the claims, and that meant *Roy L. Pearson Jr. v. Soo Chung et al.* was going to trial.

By the time it did, on June 12, it was in the hands of a new judge, Bartnoff. Media hordes descended, including television crews from Korea, where the Chungs were born. When Pearson testified, he lost his composure and began to cry. When Soo Chung took the witness stand, she did the same.

Yesterday, Soo Chung was smiling, grateful for the news from the court and hopeful that she would soon be able to put the incident behind her.

But when asked what she would do if Pearson turned up again with some clothes, she took no chances.

"We can't stop him from coming in as a customer," she said, speaking through a relative who translated her words from Korean.

Staff writers Joe Holley and Debbi Wilgoren contributed to this report.

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