

Pants Plaintiff: Customer Always Right

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WASHINGTON -- The customer is always right, said a judge who testified Wednesday in his \$54 million lawsuit against a dry cleaner who lost his pants. Administrative law judge Roy L. Pearson argued that he is acting in the interest of all city residents against poor business practices. Attorneys for the dry cleaner call his claim "outlandish."

The attorneys delivered closing arguments Wednesday, and Judge Judith Bartnoff said she would rule by the end of next week.

Under cross-examination, Pearson said the District of Columbia Consumer Protection Act, under which he is suing Custom Cleaners, should grant a customer whatever he or she wants if there is a "Satisfaction Guaranteed" sign.

Pearson, 57, originally sued Custom Cleaners for about \$65 million by adding up violations under the act and almost \$2 million in common law claims. He is no longer seeking damages related to the pants, focusing his claims on two signs in the shop that have since been removed.

Bartnoff ruled Wednesday that the "Same Day Service" sign was no longer to be considered, leaving "Satisfaction Guaranteed" the only issue in question.

Defense attorney Chris Manning asked Pearson repeatedly whether, if he was a merchant, he would pay any customer who asked for compensation. Pearson kept responding with convoluted legal language, and each time Judge Judith Bartnoff instructed him to answer the question. Finally, he said, "Yes."

Pearson alleges that Jin Chung, Soo Chung and Ki Chung, owners of the small business, committed fraud and misled consumers because they put up the signs but did not meet the satisfaction of several customers, including him.

Defense attorney Chris Manning portrayed Pearson as a bitter man with financial troubles stemming from a recent divorce who is taking out his anger on a hardworking family.

Manning went into the details of Pearson's divorce on Wednesday. Under questioning, Pearson confirmed he had only \$1,000 to \$2,000 to his name when his problems with the dry cleaners started. Pearson said he did not have a job at the time and was collecting unemployment benefits.

Pearson says his problems with Custom Cleaners began in May 2005 when he brought in several suits for alterations. A pair of pants from a blue and maroon suit was missing when he requested it two days later. The Chungs say they found the pants soon after and tried to give them to Pearson, but Pearson insists those are not his. The charcoal-gray, cuffed pants are now evidence.

"I haven't worn pants with cuffs since the 1970s," Pearson said. He also submitted into evidence a photograph of every pair of pants in his home to show that he does not like pants with cuffs.

Pearson said that he wants only \$2 million in damages for himself _ for his mental anguish and inconvenience _ plus \$500,000 in attorney's fees for representing himself. Anything more that Bartnoff might award him would go into a fund "to educate people of their rights under the Consumer Protection Act," he said.

After closing arguments, Bartnoff said she was taking the issues in the case seriously.

"I do think that this is a very important statute to protect to consumers, and I also think it's important that statutes like this are not misused," she said.

The courtroom was standing-room only for both days of the trial, with many Korean and international media outlets covering the story.

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