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Marc Fisher
Metro Columnist

Lawyer's Price For Missing Pants: \$65 Million

By [Marc Fisher](#)
Thursday, April 26, 2007; Page B01

When the neighborhood dry cleaner misplaced Roy Pearson's pants, he took action. He complained. He demanded compensation. And then he sued. Man, did he sue.

Two years, thousands of pages of legal documents and many hundreds of hours of investigative work later, Pearson is seeking to make Custom Cleaners pay -- would you believe more than the payroll of the entire Washington Nationals roster?

He says he deserves millions for the damages he suffered by not getting his pants back, for his litigation costs, for "mental suffering, inconvenience and discomfort," for the value of the time he has spent on the lawsuit, for leasing a car every weekend for 10 years and for a replacement suit, according to court papers.

Pearson is demanding \$65,462,500. The original alteration work on the pants cost \$10.50.

By the way, Pearson is a lawyer. Okay, you probably figured that. But get this: He's a judge, too -- an administrative law judge for the District of Columbia.

I'm telling you, they need to start selling tickets down at the courthouse.

Oh, where to start: How about the car? Why should Ki, Jin and Soo Chung -- the family that owns Custom Cleaners on Bladensburg Road NE in the District's Fort Lincoln section -- pay Pearson \$15,000 so he can rent a car every weekend for 10 years?

The plaintiff, who says he has devoted more than 1,000 hours to represent himself in this battle, says that as a result of poor service at Custom, he must find another cleaner. And because Pearson does not own a car, he says he will have to rent one to get his clothes taken care of.

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Back to the beginning. In 2002, Custom lost a pair of pants that Pearson had put in for cleaning. One week after the error was discovered, Custom gave Pearson a check for \$150 for new pants. A few days later, the Chungs, Korean immigrants who live in Virginia and own three D.C. cleaners, told Pearson that he was no longer welcome at their store. That dispute was eventually put aside, and Pearson continued to use the company.

Move ahead to 2005, when Pearson got a new job as a judge. He needed to wear a suit to work every day. He dug out his five Hickey Freeman suits and found them to be "uncomfortably tight." He asked Custom to let the waists out two or three inches. Worried that he might be up against his Visa card limit, he took the suits in for alterations one or two at a time.

According to a statement filed by both parties in the lawsuit, Pearson dropped off one pair of pants May 3 so he could wear them to his new job May 6. But on May 5, the pants weren't ready. Soo Chung promised them for early the next morning, but when Pearson arrived, the pants weren't there.

At this point, I should let you in on the subject of hundreds of pages of legal wrangling. Custom Cleaners at that time had two big signs on its walls. One said "Satisfaction Guaranteed," and the other said, "Same Day Service."

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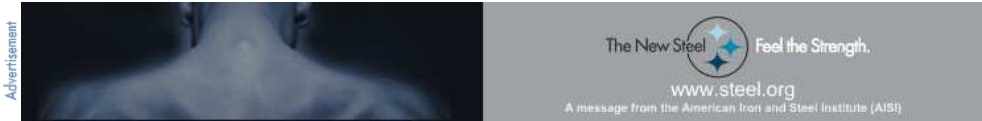


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Marc Fisher
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Pearson relied on these signs. Deeply.

He was not satisfied. And he did not get his pants back on the same day or, for that matter, on any day.

This, he says, amounts to fraud, negligence and a scam.

A week after that routine mishap -- pants go astray all the time at cleaners -- Soo Chung came up with gray trousers that she said were Pearson's. But when the judge said that he had dropped off pants with red and blue pinstripes, there was no joy in Fort Lincoln.

Pearson's first letter to the Chungs sought \$1,150 so he could buy a new suit. Two lawyers and many legal bills later, the Chungs offered Pearson \$3,000, then \$4,600 and, finally, says their attorney, Chris Manning, \$12,000 to settle the case.

But Pearson pushes on. How does he get to \$65 million? The District's consumer protection law provides for damages of \$1,500 per violation per day. Pearson started multiplying: 12 violations over 1,200 days, times three defendants. A pant leg here, a pant leg there, and soon, you're talking \$65 million.

The case, set for trial in June, is on its second judge. The Chungs have removed the signs upon which Pearson's case rests.

"This case shocks me on a daily basis," Manning says. "Pearson has a lot of time on his hands, and the Chungs have been abused in a ghastly way. It's going to cost them tens of thousands to defend this case."

A judge in the case has admonished Pearson about his take-no-prisoners tactics. When Pearson sought to broaden the case to try to prove violations of consumer protection laws on behalf of all District residents, D.C. Superior Court Judge Neal Kravitz said that "the

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court has significant concerns that the plaintiff is acting in bad faith" because of "the breathtaking magnitude of the expansion he seeks."

Pearson has put the Chungs and their attorneys to work answering long lists of questions, such as this: "Please identify by name, full address and telephone number, all cleaners known to you on May 1, 2005 in the District of Columbia, the United States and the world that advertise 'SATISFACTION GUARANTEED.' "

In the world.

The answer: "None."

In a closet of a lawyer's office in downtown Washington, there is a pair of gray wool pants, waiting to be picked up by Roy Pearson.

"We believe the pants are his," Manning says. "The tag matches his receipt."

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