

LOCAL NEWS



Court Fight Over Baron's Drags On

TBO.com The Associated Press

Published: August 23, 2008 | Updated: May 15, 2013 at 12:02 PM

WEST PALM BEACH -

Fifteen years ago, life was good for Meryl and Norman Lanson. They owned a small and respected chain of men's clothing stores. They had a young son. They had a nice house. They had good friends. They had money.

Then the phone rang.

Baron's grew from a one-store operation in 1946 to 17 stores. It catered to upwardly mobile professional men. The chain had stores from Miami to West Palm Beach, as well as two stores in Orlando and one in St. Petersburg.

Within days of receiving an after-hours call from their banker, they learned a trusted employee and friend - the godfather to their only child - had embezzled \$3 million.

Five years later, Baron's, the menswear chain that was a household name in South Florida, was finished.

But while the 52-year-old family business died, the battle was only beginning.

The legal fight, evidence of which fills dozens of boxes stacked in the dining room and garage of their suburban Boca Raton home, has destroyed the Lansons' life.

Meryl Lanson is devoted to proving that the legal system - attorneys, judges and other professionals - conspired against them.

She has fought the battle in state and federal courts. She has sued her former attorneys for malpractice. She has filed complaints with the Florida Bar and the Judicial Qualifications Commission. She has written letters to former Gov. Jeb Bush and Gov. Charlie Crist and copied the missives to the entire Florida Legislature. She has created Web sites, decrying the legal system and what it has done to her family.

And, 15 years into the battle, she shows no sign of stopping.

Last week, she filed yet another federal lawsuit, accusing Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Jeri Beth Cohen of violating her rights to represent herself in a still-unresolved lawsuit that was first filed in 1999.

"Get on with your life? How do you get on with your life?" she asks, mocking the advice many have given her. "This is a horror. They destroyed our business. They destroyed our reputation. They took our money and used it to destroy us. They're going to put me back to where I'm entitled to be."

Legal Abuse Syndrome

Those who think she's suffering from psychological problems are partially right. It's one of the many scars of the prolonged litigation. And, she says, she has a medical diagnosis to prove it.

It's called legal abuse syndrome.

Coined by a Las Vegas therapist, it is virtually unknown in medical or legal circles. But it has been embraced by people across the country who, like Lanson, say messy lawsuits turned them into emotional, physical and, in most cases, financial wrecks.

Therapist Karin Huffer says she began her research after watching her husband's suffering in an ugly contract dispute. She discovered those involved in lengthy litigation often suffer the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder - a malady most commonly associated with combat veterans.

Flashbacks, inability to concentrate, depression, exhaustion and eating disorders are common symptoms of PTSD.

While working to help Lanson for years, she has recently entered the legal arena with her. Using the Americans With Disabilities Act, Huffer has asked that Lanson receive accommodations so representing herself in court is less traumatic.

Lanson's 'Raison D'etre In Life'

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Paul Hyman this year approved most of the requests, which included taking frequent breaks, giving Lanson extra time to file court briefs and having an advocate beside her in the courtroom. He rejected her request for videotaping, explaining it's not allowed in federal courts.

At one tense hearing, Miami-Dade's Cohen was equally obliging.

But upset over remarks Cohen made at a previous hearing, in which the judge said litigation was Lanson's "raison d'etre in life," Lanson insisted she needed a new judge.

Cohen said she has no intention of stepping down.

Lanson's introduction to the legal system didn't go well.

Initially, she said, the man who embezzled millions from Baron's was offered a plea deal that would get him probation. When she made an impassioned plea in court, the judge rejected the deal.

David Peterson ultimately pleaded guilty and served about 3 1/2 years in prison. The Lansons also got about \$400,000 in property Peterson bought with the money.

A lawsuit she and her husband filed against their accounting firm for failing to catch Peterson's thievery also ended badly, Lanson said. The accounting firm's insurer agreed to settle the suit by paying \$2.4 million - far less than Lanson said they were promised. The attorneys got \$600,000 and court costs came to \$146,327. After creditors were paid, Lanson and her husband received less than \$100,000, she said.

The conclusion of the bankruptcy was equally unsatisfying. Filed as a Chapter 11 reorganization, the Lansons expected to be able to save their retail chain, which had grown to 17

stores from Miami to Orlando, including in the Boynton Beach Mall and Palm Beach Mall. When the bankruptcy process was over, they were forced to sell what was left of the business.

Lanson said the entire situation didn't make sense. Baron's entered bankruptcy with \$8.7 million in assets and \$3.2 million in liabilities. The Lansons came out with almost nothing.

Convinced that their attorneys bungled both cases, the couple in 1999 sued lawyers Marc Cooper, Ron Kopplow and Sonya Salkin. That is the case pending before Cohen.

In 2005, six years after the bankruptcy case was closed, Lanson sought to reopen it, claiming the same attorneys had committed numerous frauds upon the court.

In April 2007, bankruptcy judge Hyman said he found no evidence of fraud. "The court is not without sympathy for the Lansons, who have clearly suffered losses," he wrote in a 39-page ruling.

Through her Web sites and her work with therapist Huffer, Lanson said she is trying to reform the system and help others.

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