

Lawsuit: Lansing landlord asked for striptease in exchange for lower rent, used racial slur

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LANSING — A landlord asked a prospective tenant for sexual favors in exchange for lower rent at a Lansing property, according to a housing discrimination lawsuit filed last month.

Landlord Ryan McDonell violated the federal Fair Housing Act and a Michigan civil rights law when he sexually harassed Sarah Joy Yoder and called her an ethnic slur, according to a federal lawsuit Yoder filed in partnership with the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan.

Yoder reached out to McDonell in August 2018 about a property he had advertised for \$700 a month in Lansing's Old Everett neighborhood.

After touring the property, Yoder tried to negotiate with McDonell, who said he thought they might be able to "make a deal" if she performed a "striptease" for him, according to court records that contain text messages between the two parties.

McDonell's actions forced Yoder, 39, to seek alternative housing in Ingham County, the suit alleges.

Court records show McDonell does not yet have an attorney for the case. He did not respond to a request for comment.

Landlord asked to negotiate in person

In text messages to Yoder, McDonell acknowledged \$700 a month is "high" for rent but wrote he was trying to recuperate costs from installing new windows.

Yoder then visited the property and "walked around the house and yard for a few minutes before Ryan McDonell came outside to greet her," the complaint states.

McDonell was sweaty and breathing heavily, according to the complaint.

After the tour, Yoder and McDonell exchanged text messages about Yoder's dog, utilities and other details related to the house.

During that conversation, Yoder asked if McDonell would accept \$650 a month and McDonell wrote he bet she would be "more fun to negotiate with in person," records show.

Yoder also agreed to let McDonell look at her Facebook photos after he asked to do so.

'Any chance you would give me a striptease?'

Three days later, McDonell asked if Yoder was still interested in the house and she indicated she was, records show.

"I really liked that dress U had on the other day, any chance you would give me a striptease starting with a dress like that?" McDonell asked in messages included in the legal filing. "I'd assume we could make a deal after that."

Yoder responded that she isn't "a hooker or a stripper, even for a house."

That was her final message to McDonell that afternoon, according to court records, but not the last she received from him.

He sent two more, first saying he wasn't calling her a hooker or asking to have sex. He then wrote she wouldn't have to get naked, just do "something cute maybe and let me watch."

Landlord accused woman of prancing 'in that tiny dress'

Later that day, Yoder sent a message to a man who called himself Jason and had been listing the same property on Craigslist, according to court records.

Yoder had a friend accompany her to tour the house and told the friend they needed to leave once McDonell arrived, the complaint states.

According to the lawsuit, McDonell exited his vehicle and "berated" Yoder. He told her he had been sweaty during their first meeting because "he had masturbated while watching her through the windows."

When Yoder continued to flee, he screamed at her and called her an "Indian (expletive)," the complaint says.

Yoder, who is Native American, also alleges McDonell violated Michigan's Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis on race and national origin.

Not long after the second encounter, McDonell messaged Yoder and asked if she was "mad cause I didn't tell you my real name."

He also wrote she "pranced around in that tiny dress for 15 minutes in (the) backyard, without knocking, till I noticed you out the window," records show.

She responded just once, according to messages included in the court filing, to accuse him of "preying on poor women."

In a series of text messages, he responded by telling her to "adjust her dose," accused her of "trying to look cute" and telling him to look for her "bikini pics," the complaint says. He also asked if she was using methamphetamine and calls her "super ugly," according to court records.

Case assigned, not yet scheduled

Yoder's lawsuit asks McDonell for financial compensation for emotional distress, as well as attorney fees and expert witness fees.

The Fair Housing Center asks for the same, alleging McDonell's actions "frustrated" the organization's mission "to end discrimination in housing and public accommodations" and forced the center to divert resources.

The case has been assigned to U.S. District Court Chief Judge Robert Jonker and is not yet scheduled for a hearing, according to the case docket. McDonell has until Oct. 25 to respond to the lawsuit.

McDonell's wife, Sandy, is also named as a defendant in the lawsuit. The couple bought the property for \$15,000 in 2011, Ingham County records show.