

Livingston Daily

LOCAL

Interracial couple files lawsuit claiming they were blocked from buying lake home in Hamburg Township

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A interracial couple is suing two Livingston County real estate agents who they say conspired to block them from buying a home on Zukey Lake in September.

Verdell and Julie Franklin, of Maumee, Ohio, filed a housing discrimination suit last week in U.S. District Court, alleging Richard Beaudin and Mary Kay Ikens prevented the married couple from making an offer on a home because Verdell Franklin is Black.

RE/MAX Platinum and KW Realty Livingston also were named as defendants.

Beaudin said Tuesday he was not the Franklins' real estate agent and never had any contact with them.

"I wouldn't know who the people were," he said. "They weren't my customer. I wasn't involved with them at all. I had the house listed; that's all I did."

The company he works for, KW Realty Livingston, echoed Beaudin's comments.

Attempts to reach Ikens and RE/MAX Platinum on Tuesday were unsuccessful.

Verdell Franklin is chief financial officer at the Toledo Fire Department, while Julie Franklin is a registered nurse anesthetist at Toledo Hospital, according to a news release from the Pitt McGehee Palmer Bonanni & Rivers law firm. Julie Franklin is white and was born and raised in Ireland, the firm said.

The Ohio couple said they have regularly visited friends who live on the lake in Hamburg Township over the past decade and decided to buy a second home there.

Julie Franklin contacted KW Realty Livingston about a listing for a house on Zukey Drive in early September and was contacted by Ikens, who scheduled a showing for later that day, according to the lawsuit.

During the showing, Ikens "demonstrated no interest in the Franklins as potential buyers" and didn't ask about their level of interest or their financial qualifications, the suit said.

"Toward the end of the showing, the Franklins informed Ikens that they wished to put an offer on the house immediately," it said. "Ikens reacted in an awkward way and instead of immediately following through with the Franklins to process and present the offer, she informed the Franklins and their friends that she had to show her friend a home nearby."

Ikens later told the couple she had spoken with Beaudin and said that unless they were prepared to make a cash-only offer of at least \$350,000 and accept the property "as-is," their offer would not be considered, according to the suit.

The couple was prepared to make an offer, but not an all-cash offer for that amount, the suit says. They made a starting offer of \$300,000 and noted they were prepared to pay more, if necessary, the suit said.

In late October, the property was listed as sold for \$300,000, and property records show it was bought by a white man who obtained a \$225,000 mortgage, according to the suit.

The Franklins filed a complaint with the nonprofit Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid-Michigan, which helped in the initial investigation, the law firm said.

Hamburg Township is overwhelmingly white, and there are no current Black homeowners on Zukey Lake, attorney Robin Wagner said in the news release.

"It appears that there has never been an African American homeowner in the Zukey Lake neighborhood," Wagner said. "It also appears that the defendants in this case would prefer that it stay that way."

The Franklins allege the two real estate agents conspired to discriminate against them by imposing "onerous conditions on the sale," such a high cash-only price and an "as-is/no-inspection sale."

They are seeking unspecified damages for emotional distress, as well as punitive damages and costs. They also want the court to order the defendants to undergo training about civil rights laws involving real estate.

Ikens could not be reached on Tuesday morning at telephone numbers listed for her online. An attorney for the RE/MAX Platinum office did not immediately return a telephone message left for him.

In a written statement, Beaudin said he represented the sellers and never received an offer from the Franklins via their agent. The sellers were presented with any offers received, he said.

"I'm a Realtor," he said. "We live by the code of ethics. Discrimination has no place in real estate, especially here in Livingston County."

Erin McKenzie, team leader at KW Realty Livingston, said the property sale cited by the Franklins ended with a \$350,000 offer that was later reduced to \$300,000 after an inspection. Company agents never met the Franklins and never received a purchase offer from them, she said.

"It was a really normal, clean transaction," she said.

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