



NAILAH K. BYRD
CUYAHOGA COUNTY CLERK OF COURTS
1200 Ontario Street
Cleveland, Ohio 44113

Court of Common Pleas

New Case Electronically Filed: COMPLAINT
December 9, 2024 18:16

By: RICHARD C. HABER 0046788

Confirmation Nbr. 3348354

HOLLIE STRANO

CV 24 108410

vs.

WKYC-TV, LLC, ET AL

Judge: NANCY A. FUERST

Pages Filed: 11

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
CUYAHOGA COUNTY, OHIO

Hollie Strano,
300 Gretna Green Drive
Highland Heights, Ohio 44143

Plaintiff,

vs.

WKYC-TV, LLC,
c/o CT Corporation System
1300 East 9th Street
Cleveland, Ohio 44114

and

Tegna National Sales & Finance, LLC,
c/o CT Corporation System
4400 Easton Commons Way, Suite 125
Columbus, Ohio 43219

and

Micki Byrnes,
7989 Music Street,
Chagrin Falls, Ohio 44022

Defendants.

) CASE NO.:

) JUDGE:

) **COMPLAINT**

) *(Jury Demand Endorsed Hereon)*

NOW COMES Plaintiff Hollie Strano (“Plaintiff” or “Strano”), by and through undersigned counsel, and for her Complaint against WKYC-TV, LLC (“WKYC”), Tegna National Sales & Finance, LLC (“Tegna”), and Micki Byrnes (“Byrnes”) (collectively “Defendants”) and hereby state as follows:

THE PARTIES

1. Plaintiff Hollie Strano is a citizen of the State of Ohio, residing in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Strano is a “person” and an “employee” as those terms are defined under O.R.C. §

4112.01. Strano is, and was at all times relevant herein, disabled under the law. At all times relevant herein, Strano was employed by Defendants in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

2. Defendant WKYC-TV is a Delaware limited liability company with its principal place of business in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. WKYC is a “person” and an “employer” as those terms are defined under O.R.C. § 4112.01.

3. Defendant Tegna is a Delaware limited liability company doing business in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Tegna is a “person” and an “employer” as those terms are defined under O.R.C. § 4112.01.

4. Collectively, WKYC and Tegna (at times referred to as “Corporate Defendants”) represent a single employer or integrated enterprise employing Plaintiff because they have, among other things, interrelated operations, including common offices, common record keeping, shared bank accounts and equipment; common management, directors, and boards; centralized control of labor relations and personnel; and/or common ownership and financial control.

5. Defendant Byrnes is a resident of the State of Ohio, residing in Geauga County, Ohio and working in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Byrnes is a “person” as those terms are defined under O.R.C. § 4112.01.

VENUE AND JURISDICTION

6. This Court has jurisdiction over Plaintiff’s claims insofar as they arise under Ohio statutory and common law.

7. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to Civ. R. 3(C)(3) and (6) because Defendants conducted activity giving rise to Plaintiff’s claims for relief in Cuyahoga County; and, because all or part of Plaintiff’s claims for relief arose in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

8. Hollie Strano worked as an on-air television personality and meteorologist for WKYC, a television station that is owned by Tegna and managed by Byrnes, for more than 22 years.

9. Strano was one of the highest rated on-air personalities and produced substantial advertising income for the station during her employment.

10. On-air personalities, including Strano, use social media to connect with viewers and promote brands.

11. Strano was praised by Defendants for her social media presence throughout her employment.

12. In fact, Strano received praise in her 2016 performance review that her “social media contributions lead WKYC and [she’s] also one of the most popular social personalities in this market and within Tegna.”

13. In her 2017 performance review, Strano was told “[y]ou are one of our most important stars. A very small handful of people represent our brand so effectively to such a wide audience . . . Your most important asset is your personality . . . The audience sees it and responds, especially on social media. You continue to be a social leader in our company. I’m always proud when you are used as an example for the rest of Tegna.”

14. In her 2018 performance review, Strano was directed to “[u]se your influence on WKYC social media accounts to drive traffic to our platforms.”

15. During her employment, Defendants were aware that Strano suffered from anxiety and depression.

16. Defendants historically encouraged Strano to use her platform to discuss her disabilities of anxiety and depression.

17. Defendants did so because they believed *these* disabilities were relatable and believed Strano's public disclosure of these disabilities would increase television ratings for the station.

18. To the satisfaction of Defendants, Strano shared her personal experience of anxiety and depression, including seeking mental health treatment, publicly through her social media pages, public speaking engagements, and a series on WKYC called "You Are Not Alone," between 2019 and 2023.

19. During this period, Defendants never disciplined Strano for her social media posts, or for any other reason. Rather, Defendants encouraged Strano to continue promoting her personal struggles for television ratings.

20. In fact, in her 2019 performance review, Defendants stated that "Hollie's job doesn't end at 7am or mid-day, but it absolutely is a 24-hour role when it comes to connecting with viewers on social. Hollie's inspirational quotes have resonated with the digital audience and [WKYC] should find new, innovative techniques to best channel Hollie's strengths on Instagram & social in the new year." In this same review, Defendants praised Strano for her series on mental health, where Strano publicly discussed her experience with anxiety and depression.

21. Defendants noted in Strano's 2021 performance review that "viewers have related to Hollie" in regard to her series on mental health and her personal experience with anxiety and depression.

22. In her 2022 performance review, Defendants state: “Hollie’s authenticity has become even more powerful over the past couple of years as her courage in sharing her own mental health battles has led to impactful storytelling in our ‘You Are Not Alone’ series.”

23. Strano also suffers from alcohol use disorder.

24. Anti-disability discrimination laws prohibit employers from discriminating against individuals for having, having a history of, or seeking treatment for alcohol use disorder.

25. Defendants became aware of Strano’s disability by at least November 23, 2023 when Strano was involved in an alcohol-related accident.

26. Following the accident, Strano sought treatment for alcohol use disorder and has been sober since November 2023.

27. Notably, Defendants did not terminate Strano following the accident, but rather opportunistically reduced her compensation by almost 35%, while continuing to capitalize on her popularity and ratings.

28. Strano continued her employment at WKYC and performed her job responsibilities well, leading to WKYC extending Strano’s contract in February 2024 and again in July 2024.

29. After seeking treatment for alcohol use disorder, Strano publicly disclosed her experience with addiction and addiction treatment, just like she did, at Defendants’ suggestion, regarding her experience with anxiety and depression.

30. Defendants, based on their negative biases against people with substance use disorders, did not want Strano to speak publicly about *this* disability.

31. Byrnes, President and General Manager of WKYC, told Strano to stop publicly speaking about her experience with addiction recovery and instructed her to only speak about the weather.

32. Defendants prohibited Strano from publishing a podcast that discussed her addiction and recovery, despite Strano previously being encouraged to speak on podcasts about her experience with anxiety and depression.

33. Defendants only took issue with Strano speaking out about personal struggles when it related to alcohol use disorder.

34. Defendants did not take issue with other employees speaking the same way publicly about other disabilities that are less stigmatized.

35. Defendants' perpetuation of the stigma of addiction, through an effort to silence Strano, is discriminatory.

36. In 2024, Strano received her first negative performance review during the course of her 22 years of employment at WKYC. In the review, Defendants claimed Strano's performance was not meeting expectations because she was speaking publicly about her addiction and addiction recovery.

37. After Strano's accident, and after Strano began to publicly speak of her addiction and addiction recovery, Defendants began criticizing Strano for posts on social media that Defendants had previously taken no issue with, and which other similarly situated employees were not criticized.

38. In April 2024, it was confirmed to Strano that mentioning third parties, brands, or services did not violate WKYC and Tegna's social media policy unless the brand, product, or service was tagged in the post.

39. On July 6, 2024, Strano made a social media post that said "Fall in love with taking care of yourself! Coca-cola you're out, Poppi you are in!" In the post, Strano mentioned, but did not "tag," Poppi, a low-sugar and low-calorie soda brand.

40. The post did not “tag” a brand, product, or service.

41. On July 15, 2024, Defendants terminated Strano, purportedly for tagging Poppi in her July 6, 2024 post without Defendants permission purportedly in violation of company policy, which states: “**Do not post about a brand, product or service in exchange for anything of value.** Do not post anything that could create the appearance you received something of value for mentioning a brand, product or service.” (emphasis in original).

42. Strano did not receive anything of value in exchange for her post, nor did the post “create the appearance [Strano] received something of value for mentioning a brand, product or service.” Thus, the post did not violate the policy or the instructions that Strano had been provided in April 2024.

43. Indeed, Strano had previously actually tagged brands using a hashtag without Defendants’ express permission and was not terminated.

44. Many on-air personalities make social media posts where they tag businesses using hashtags without Defendants’ permission and not a single other employee has been disciplined, let alone terminated, for such posts.

45. Defendants have never terminated an employee for tagging or mentioning a brand in a social media post without permission prior to, or since, Strano.

46. Defendants’ practice is to ask on-air personalities to edit posts if Defendants believe the post may be in violation of a policy, not discipline or termination.

47. Defendants have not taken such severe adverse employment actions against other employees for more serious infractions, including allegations of sexual harassment.

48. Defendants reason provided for termination is merely pretext for discrimination.

49. Plaintiff timely filed a charge of discrimination with the Ohio Civil Rights Commission pursuant to O.R.C. §§ 4112.051 and 4112.052. Plaintiff received a Notice of Right to Sue issued November 21, 2024. All prerequisites to filing suit under O.R.C. § 4112.052 have been satisfied.

COUNT ONE
(Disability Discrimination in Violation of O.R.C. § 4112 – Corporate Defendants)

50. The foregoing allegations are incorporated by reference as if fully rewritten herein.

51. Strano is, has a history of, and was perceived by Defendants as, disabled.

52. The Corporate Defendants subjected Strano to adverse employment actions based on her disability, including termination.

53. Strano was qualified for her position as an on-air personality and meteorologist with or without reasonable accommodation and met the expectations of the Corporate Defendants during employment.

54. The Corporate Defendants' reasons for termination are pretextual and intended to obscure Defendants' discriminatory motive.

55. The Corporate Defendants' conduct violated O.R.C. § 4112.02.

56. As a direct and proximate result of the Corporate Defendants' conduct, Strano has suffered, and will continue to suffer, economic and non-economic damages for which Defendants are liable, including, but not limited to, pain and suffering, emotional distress, loss of professional reputation, and loss of past and future wages, benefits, and other privileges and conditions of employment.

57. The Corporate Defendants intentionally, willfully, recklessly, and maliciously violated Strano's rights under O.R.C. § 4112.02.

58. The Corporate Defendants are liable to Strano for past and future economic and non-economic compensatory damages, back pay, front pay, punitive damages, attorneys' fees, costs, interest, and other equitable relief that this Court deems appropriate, including reinstatement pursuant to O.R.C. § 4112.99.

COUNT TWO
(Direct or Indirect Acts of Micki Byrnes in Violation of O.R.C. § 4112.02(J))

59. The foregoing allegations are incorporated by reference as if fully rewritten herein.

60. Micki Byrnes, President and General Manager of WKYC, made the decision to terminate Strano based on Strano's known disability.

61. Byrnes' committed acts, directly or indirectly, that are declared by O.R.C. § 4112.02 to be unlawful discriminatory acts, including discrimination on the basis of disability.

62. Byrnes may be held liable pursuant to O.R.C. § 4112.02(J) for her discriminatory conduct.

63. As a direct and proximate result of Byrnes' conduct, Strano has suffered, and will continue to suffer, economic and non-economic damages for which Defendants are liable, including, but not limited to, pain and suffering, emotional distress, loss of professional reputation, and loss of past and future wages, benefits, and other privileges and conditions of employment.

64. Byrnes intentionally, willfully, recklessly, and maliciously violated Strano's rights under O.R.C. § 4112.02.

65. Byrnes is liable to Strano for past and future economic and non-economic compensatory damages, back pay, front pay, punitive damages, attorneys' fees, costs, interest, and other equitable relief that this Court deems appropriate, including reinstatement pursuant to O.R.C. § 4112.99.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff prays for the following relief:

- A. All remedies available under Ohio Revised Code § 4112 *et seq.*, including, but not limited to, past and future economic damages in an amount in excess of Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars (\$25,000), back pay, front pay, lost benefits, reinstatement/reemployment, punitive damages, interest, all attorney fees, expert fees, and costs.
- B. All other relief that this Court deems appropriate.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/Richard C. Haber

Richard C. Haber (0046788)

Lindsey K. Self (0099647)

Natalie D. Davis (0102476)

HABER LLP

30195 Chagrin Boulevard, Suite 323

Pepper Pike, Ohio 44124

Office: (216) 250-4782

Fax: (216) 250-4783

Email: rhaber@haberllp.com

lself@haberllp.com

ndavis@haberllp.com

Attorneys for Plaintiff

JURY DEMAND

A trial by jury is hereby requested.

/s/Richard C. Haber
Richard C. Haber