

Man Loses Job After False Claims

On April 13, 1999, Emerson "Chuck" Lehner sued the Boca Raton Polo Club Property Owners Association and several of its Board of Governors' members for defamation. The action followed Mr. Lehner's termination from the club following very serious and damaging accusations.

Mr. Lehner began his career in the private club industry as a chef in New York. He eventually became more interested in the managing aspects of the industry. In 1991, he applied for the position of General Manager for the Polo Club, which was then one of the largest private clubs in the country. Obviously impressed with his credentials, Mr. Lehner was hired over many other well-qualified candidates.

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For the next five years, Mr. Lehner proved just how capable he was at managing a large staff and maintaining a substantial budget. He was well liked and well respected by his co-workers and club members. He improved the club significantly in the areas of food service and dining during his tenure there.

Despite Mr. Lehner's successes, in 1997 a small faction of members began a campaign to remove him from his position. Some new board members in 1998, made claims that Mr. Lehner was stealing money and receiving kickbacks from the club's contractors. The effort seriously divided club members and caused daily problems for Mr. Lehner in performing his duties. Incredibly, the campaign elevated into what many members later described, in deposition testimony and letters addressed to various Board members, as a "witch hunt." Three months later, the board voted 5-4 to terminate Mr. Lehner's contract.

Despite his impeccable credentials, Mr. Lehner was unable to find new employment for almost a year. Reliable professionals in the industry advised him that the rumors about his alleged criminal activities at the Polo Club were hurting him professionally.

Mr. Lehner is a quiet, gentle, disciplined man, devoted to his family and his profession. He has been happily married to his wife MaryLou for more than 30 years, and together they had raised two very successful sons. Mr. Lehner's talents and abilities allowed him to be a good provider for his family. Though he felt terribly wronged by the Polo Club and its board of directors, the decision to take legal action was an extremely difficult one.

Attorneys Jack Scarola and Ellen Brandt represented Mr. Lehner. The case was referred to them from Richard Goldman of Grossman & Goldman in Boca Raton. After two mediations, the case was settled for \$90,000. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Lehner was offered a General Manager position at another private club in Boca. ■



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