

Fair Housing Center of Greater Madison

African American Student Discriminated Against by Madison Apartment Owner

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Simret Abraha, an African American student at the University of Wisconsin, has successfully settled a race discrimination complaint against apartment owner William Titley. While the exact monetary terms of the settlement are confidential, Abraha calls the settlement "very satisfactory."

The complaint stemmed from Abraha's attempt to view an apartment at 128 N. Butler in Madison. "I set up an appointment with the owner of the building and he was supposed to meet me on the sidewalk," Abraha recalled. On his way to the apartment, looking for a parking spot, Abraha noticed a man standing outside the building. "I drove by and made eye contact with the man and nodded my head to let him know I would be right back." When he returned after parking his car, the man was gone. Abraha rang the doorbell and waited, but the apartment owner did not appear. After leaving the building, Abraha called the owner and asked why he hadn't kept the appointment. The owner said that there were no longer any availabilities. Subsequently, Abraha had a white friend call the owner to inquire whether there were available units. The white caller was told that there were.

After discovering the apparent discrimination, Abraha was devastated. "I went home to my parents' house right after the incident," Abraha stated. "I was emotionally crushed and wanted to remove myself from the situation."

Abraha filed a complaint through the Fair Housing Center of Greater Madison (FHCGM) and an investigation was structured and implemented to look into the allegation. Utilizing an investigative method referred to as "testing," FHCGM uncovered the same differential treatment Abraha described in the complaint. In the course of the investigation, the owner refused to answer the door to an African American tester and would not acknowledge her as she approached the building for her appointment. The owner, however, kept an appointment with a white tester who was subsequently given information about available vacant units.

FHCGM's parent organization, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC) referred Abraha to Madison Attorney David Sparer of Herrick & Kasdorf, L.L.P. Abraha filed a lawsuit in Dane County Circuit Court and a complaint with the US

Department of Housing and Urban Development. The complaint was subsequently settled for monetary relief paid to Abraha. In addition, affirmative relief was part of the settlement, including attendance at a fair housing training seminar conducted by MMFHC. Further, Titley agreed to follow the fair housing laws when engaging in all future rental and sale of housing.