

Plaintiff awarded \$95 million in harassment suit against Aaron's

Rent-to-own giant plans to appeal verdict

Jay McIntosh -- Furniture Today, June 9, 2011

EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill. — A federal court jury here has awarded a \$95 million verdict against rent-to-own merchant Aaron's in a sexual harassment case.

According to court documents, the U.S. District Court jury ruled on Wednesday that plaintiff Ashley Alford should receive \$15 million in compensatory damages and \$80 million in punitive damages from the Atlanta-based company.

In a press release later, Aaron's said it intends to appeal the verdict, saying the award "does not accurately reflect the evidence in the case."

In her complaint, Alford said she was employed at an Aaron's store in Fairview Heights, Ill., in 2005 and 2006 and claimed that the store manager, Richard Moore, made verbal sexually offensive comments to her, inappropriately touched her and eventually sexually assaulted her. *She said she complained to her supervisor and called a company hotline but no action was taken to end the harassment.*

Her lawyers, Benedict Morelli and David Ratner of the Morelli Ratner Law Firm in New York and Judy Cates and David Cates of the Cates Law Firm in Swansea, Ill., said in a press release that the verdict may be the largest award in U.S. history in a sexual harassment case.

Aaron's said that of the total damages awarded, \$50 million exceeds the maximum permitted by law. "Aaron's is extremely disappointed with the jury's verdict and believes that the award does not accurately reflect the evidence that was presented in this case," said Chad Strickland, vice president of associate resources for Aaron's. "We feel strongly that this verdict is the result of a decision made by a classic runaway jury, and because of that we are confident that the damages will be greatly reduced. We intend to appeal the verdict and seek a fairer and more equitable outcome."

Aaron's also said it insists on proper treatment of employees, and does not tolerate an inappropriate or disrespectful work environment. "Aaron's is committed to establishing and building a strong, professional and respectful employee culture, in every community we serve and in every store we operate," said Robin Loudermilk, president and CEO.