

Maumee couple files housing discrimination lawsuit in Michigan

1/23/2021

BY ALLISON DUNN / THE BLADE



Verdell Franklin and his wife, Julie Franklin, while visiting friends at Zukey Lake in Michigan. The couple tried to buy a home at the lake but encountered several challenges as they attempted to purchase the home, leading to a federal discrimination lawsuit.

Courtesy Franklin Family

An interracial Maumee couple walked through a lake house on the market in Michigan nearly four months ago, discussing plans to fix it up to make it their own.

The couple, Verdell and Julie Franklin, contacted a real estate agent, Mary Kay Ikens, to schedule a tour of the Hamburg Township cottage that sits on Zukey Lake, approximately 17 miles northwest of Ann Arbor. The Franklins traveled to see the home Sept. 4, just days after it was put on the market.

They fell in love with it.

It was the perfect vacation home for the husband and wife and their two college-age sons, with the added benefit of being only a few doors away from some of the couple's closest friends. They told Ms. Ikens they wanted to put in an offer.

Ms. Franklin, a white woman employed as a certified registered nurse anesthetist, and Mr. Franklin, an African-American man who serves as the Toledo Fire and Rescue Department's chief financial officer, tendered an initial offer of \$300,000 for the cottage that was listed for \$350,000. The couple said while that was a starting price, they were prepared to pay more.

But the Franklins, who have been married for 30 years, said they were met with a series of conditions that didn't apply to the property's final buyer, a white man. The couple told The Blade they believe they were treated unfairly and alleged race played a role.

"Being an interracial couple, there are things you are going to go through — it's just going to happen. But nothing this blatant," Mr. Franklin said about the incident.

The couple contacted the Michigan Fair Housing Authority and an investigation took place, according to a fair housing discrimination lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Michigan.

The complaint is against Ms. Ikens; the real estate agent selling the property, Rick Beaudin; and their respective associated companies, RE/MAX Platinum and Keller Williams Realty Livingston, both of Brighton, Mich.

Both Ms. Ikens and Mr. Beaudin have denied any wrongdoing.

"At this time, we have not been served a lawsuit. However, we do not try cases in the press, the radio, or on television other than to say we are confident in the judicial system and believe that any allegations regarding this will be found without merit and we shall be fully vindicated," said Joe DeKroub Jr., broker and owner of RE/MAX Platinum, said on Ms. Ikens' behalf.

Mr. Beaudin told The Blade he had nothing to do with the matter. Mr. Beaudin said he represented the property sellers, he never had any communication with the Franklins, and he is not Ms. Ikens' boss, nor does he work with her.

"Not possible — we work for different companies," Mr. Beaudin said. "How can I be involved if they never talked to me — never wrote an offer that got submitted? I don't know who other agents show my listing to."

The Franklins' attorney, Robin Wagner, said the lawsuit has been filed in federal court and the defendants will be served with the complaint. They'll then have a chance to respond to the allegations.

According to the lawsuit, Ms. Ikens displayed little interest in the potential buyers. During the showing, she didn't ask them about employment or purchasing qualifications, nor she did gauge their level of interest in the Zukey Lake cottage or any other potential residence, it says.

Once the couple said they were interested in tendering the offer, Ms. Ikens left the house and returned later with unexpected information that was not initially provided in the selling details.

After speaking with her boss — who is not named in the complaint — Ms. Ikens informed the Franklins that the seller would only consider offers above the \$350,000 listing price; it had to be an all-cash offer, and there would be no housing inspection, according to the lawsuit.

"At that point, we stopped because we couldn't do anything. We don't have \$350,000 cash — we were going to mortgage it," Mr. Franklin said.

The couple said they were devastated about losing the perfect vacation home.

Mrs. Franklin tracked the cottage's status. According to the lawsuit, nearly two months later, it was sold to a white man for \$300,000 — their initial offer. The property was also purchased through a loan and it was inspected, according to the lawsuit.

The couple seeks an injunction in the form of remediation or training and they also want the agents to surrender their real estate licenses. The couple seek damages exceeding \$75,000.