

CAT RESCUER SUED BY HUMANE SOCIETY OVER WEB COMMENTS

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LAWRENCEVILLE — A Lawrenceville cat rescuer disgusted with how the Atlanta Humane Society operates openly expressed her views on the Internet and is now facing a \$75,000 lawsuit filed by the organization and its executive director claiming "defamation of character."

Kathi Mills, 31, of Lawrenceville found out she was being sued by the Atlanta Humane Society and its executive director, Bill Garrett, late Monday night when a sheriff's deputy served her a summons at her home.

"I was blind-sided," she said Tuesday morning.

Mills, a Web content consultant who works in Smyrna, operates from her home www.kittyvillage.org, an organization which helps humane societies, independent cat rescuers and a few owners find felines new homes.

But it was in a Yahoo! group chat room where she, and many other animal advocates, voiced their disgust with Bill Garrett and the Atlanta Humane Society after an Atlanta television news program aired an unfavorable investigation into the organization's operations. Among the allegations were that the AHS killed animals quickly without trying hard to find them homes and lying in fund-raising letters to the public stating they find homes for nearly all the animals they receive.

As listed in the lawsuit, some of Mills' comments included:

- "Mr. Kill (referring to Garrett) is also the figurehead president of the Humane Association of Georgia"
- ("I am personally withdrawing my support from the group until") "they get a leader who does not delight in slaughtering pets for fun and profit."
- "Bill Garrett is not worthy to lick the dog or cat poop off our shoes. He is evil and it is time for the Atlanta rescue community to unite in ending his long and tragic career not only at AHS, but in every pet-related capacity."

Yes, these are strong statements, Mills admitted.

"But I stand by my comments. I know when I put in written form what I think, there is the chance it will be distributed. But the fundamental issue here is that I was criticizing his (Garrett) performance. And the first amendment guarantees I can do this," she said.

Edward Greenblatt, Garrett's and the AHS's Atlanta attorney, feels differently, however. By writing the "malicious" and "untrue" statements which were then distributed to hundreds of people via the Internet and e-mails, Mills hurt the reputation of Garrett and the AHS and should be held accountable. Garrett and AHS are seeking a jury trial and \$75,000.

"I'm a strong believer in the freedom of speech, but it does have its limitations," Greenblatt said.

The lawsuit contends that the statements made by Mills and others were not true, hurtful and hurtful to the reputation of Garrett and the AHS. This criteria, plus the fact that Garrett is not an elected official, makes the statements libelous, Humane Society officials believe.

"We can't stop them from saying these things, but we can try to hold them responsible for the consequences," Greenblatt said. Consequences include potential loss of donations to the Atlanta Humane Society from the public as well as harm to Garrett's professional reputation.

"Mr. Garrett and those at the Atlanta Humane Society have devoted their lives to the care for animals. What they have said is untrue and was said with malice. Now, a jury will have to decide," he added.

Mills is unfazed, however, and plans to fight the lawsuit. Currently, she is looking for a local attorney.

"The entire purpose of this suit is that they want me to stop criticizing and I won't do that until they address the issues we have raised," she said. "They picked the wrong person. I'm prepared to fight it all the way."

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