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Former knights take claims to legal arena

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Two former knights at Medieval Times in Schaumburg have sued their longtime employer, claiming their sudden firings last year were less than chivalrous.

The lawsuits differ slightly in their particulars, but both men claim their firings for poor performance in June 2004 were the company's way of avoiding the consequences of injuries suffered on the job.

James Killis Jr. of South Elgin believes his firing was retaliation for a workers' compensation claim filed for an injury he had just about recovered from.

Killis, 29, said his claim was the first filed after a company warning in 2003 against any more such claims being made.

Garret Bonham, 29, of Algonquin acknowledges that a decade's worth of injuries had left him incapable of continuing to do the same job he'd been doing up until his firing.

"It was tough, because at first in my own head I thought I could still do it," he said.

Nevertheless, Bonham said the American Disabilities Act should have compelled the company to seek another existing job for him within the operation — even if it was an entry-level job as a squire who assists the knights.

Instead, Bonham claims, the company showed him no indication it would even consider his request.

Medieval Times Marketing Manager Melissa Umali said the company was declining comment on the cases, confident that the lawsuits would be appropriately handled in court.

Bonham's lawsuit is a class action complaint, capable of being joined by others who feel themselves in the same circumstances.

Bonham's suit seeks whatever damages might be proven at trial, that the company be prohibited from firing disabled employees without first offering them another appropriate position and that terminated employees be offered COBRA insurance benefits, which Bonham claims he wasn't.

Killis' lawsuit, on the other hand, seeks \$75,000 in punitive damages and whatever additional relief the court decides on in compensation for the loss of a job Killis claims he could have continued.

Both men said the company in the spring of 2003 communicated its unwillingness to handle any more workers compensation claims from knights who performed such stunts as falling off

their horses during combat simulations.

Bonham said this was the stunt that caused the most frequent and significant injuries, even though it was the one most trained for. He even broke his collarbone once while doing this stunt and had to miss two months of work afterward.

Attorney Kenneth Schwartz said he handled workers' compensation claims for many of the knights at Medieval Times for about 10 years.

Though he'd heard references to a "Ken Schwartz meeting" in 2003 at which employees were allegedly discouraged from continuing to use his services, Schwartz said he's never seen documentation or other evidence of the existence of this meeting. But he did see the number of claims he handled at any one time drop from between five and 10 about that time to the current one.

Though the management style that characterized Bonham's final years with the company might have sounded somewhat aggressive, he said, it was something most were willing to put up with in exchange for a job they loved.

"It has a romantic appeal to it because you're performing in front of 1,800 people every night," he said. "Kids look up to you."

Since the end of their "knighthoods" 16 months ago, both men have found more modern ways of making ends meet. Killis works at the Trackside in South Elgin, while Bonham delivers the Daily Herald near Algonquin after earlier stints as a mortgage loan officer and a cable TV installer.

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