

HOW DID IT GET THIS FAR?

Karen McPherson

The Medical University of South Carolina

John Rowland is an administrative supervisor in the department of student affairs at South Midwestern University. Recently one of his employees, Jeanette, accused an employee from a different department of assaulting her. The initial complaint that John received described an argument between the two female employees ending with the other employee, Mary, placing her hand on the Jeanette's shoulder. Over the following weeks Jeanette filed a report with public safety stating that Mary lunged at her and attempted to choke her. She also filed a lawsuit claiming that she fears for her safety when she is at work. With lawyers becoming involved and a court appearance looming John wonders, "how did it get this far?"

INTRODUCTION

John stared at the subpoena in his hand. "This is a nightmare!" he said to himself. Already the atmosphere in the building had changed, and John knew the office environment would remain tense no matter the outcome. He had no idea how he should handle this situation or if there was any chance at all that this could be resolved without going to court. It just seemed so extreme! How did this escalate so far?

THE WORKPLACE

John had worked in the office of student affairs at South Midwestern University for over fifteen years. Through the years he had moved himself into an administrative position and now was the direct supervisor for seven employees. His division was made up predominantly of female employees and they seemed to get along well most of the time. Overall, John's division ran smoothly and he had not had any major disputes amongst his employees. John's employees shared their office space with another division of the department of Student Affairs; and, although the different divisions rarely interacted, the two groups coexisted peacefully.

John had one employee, Jeanette, who could be a nuisance occasionally with her complaints, but she was usually appeased by a few reassuring words. Jeanette had always been a hard worker who did her job well, but the death of her mother a

year ago seemed to have changed her personality. Since that time, she had developed a tendency to be very dramatic and to act somewhat paranoid. She once stated that everyone in the office was “out to get her” because she didn’t get approval to attend a conference after submitting a last minute request. She also complained that someone left a plastic snake in front of her office, although no other employee ever saw such an object. Another complaint pertained to song lyrics, whose content Jeanette found disturbing, that had been left on a printer near Jeanette’s office. Despite the fact that fifteen employees share the two printers in the workspace, Jeanette insisted that the lyrics were left as a direct threat to her. Several employees, including John, were starting to question Jeanette’s mental stability. Since she continued to complete all of her job requirements, though, there was not really any action that John could take to remove her from the department. After each complaint John made sure that he took the time to meet with Jeanette personally. He found that if she had the opportunity to voice all of her concerns, she usually would let the issue go after about a week. John made sure that each of her complaints was documented in his files.

THE INCIDENT

One morning John entered the office and found Jeanette waiting for him near his door. She seemed upset, and John could sense that something had happened. John greeted her and asked if she needed to come in to his office to speak with him. Jeanette followed him in to the office and began to tell her story. She told him that she had been working in her office early that morning and that she had been listening to music on her radio. Jeanette usually came to work an hour earlier than most of the employees because it allowed her to leave early to catch the bus. On that particular morning, the only other person in the office was a member of the other division, Mary. Jeanette went on to state that Mary came to her office door and told her that the music was too loud and that it was bothering her. Mary told Jeanette that she needed to turn her music down. Jeanette informed John, “I told her that it was my office and I would listen to my music as loud as I wanted.” Jeanette went on to say that Mary then entered her office, placed her hand on Jeanette’s shoulder and said, “Okay, Jeanette, you do that.” After telling John this story, Jeanette became very agitated and began shouting, “She had no right to come in to my office and tell me what I can and can’t do! She’s not my boss! And how dare she put her hand on me like that! Can you believe that she touched me! I know that there are rules about that kind of stuff. She can’t get away with this!”

John tried to remain composed and attempted to calm Jeanette down. He told her that he understood that this was very upsetting for her. He agreed that Mary should not have entered Jeanette’s office uninvited and that she should not have

touched her. John assured Jeanette that he would speak with both Mary and her supervisor. Jeanette continued to complain, so John told her that he would also contact Human Resources and have the incident documented. Jeanette eventually relaxed and agreed to return to her office.

Later that morning, John met with Mary and her supervisor to discuss the incident. Mary was astounded that Jeanette had complained about her. She felt that it was a gross overreaction to a minor disagreement. Although Mary did not have any prior complaints against her, John told her that he was required to report the incident to the Human Resources department. This greatly upset Mary, but John told her that Jeanette was insistent. Over the next few weeks, both women spoke with HR, and Mary personally apologized to Jeanette. Human Resources decided that no additional action was required, and John believed that everything would soon return to normal in the office.

THE LAWSUIT

Two weeks passed without any further mention of the incident. Jeanette primarily kept to herself, spending most of her time in her office with her door closed. The other employees told John that they could hear Jeanette moving furniture around in her office, but he decided that it was best not to ask her about it. Jeanette no longer arrived earlier than the other employees, although she continued to leave work before the majority of them each day. The atmosphere was definitely a little tense whenever Jeanette was around, and most of the employees attempted to avoid her.

One morning Mary burst in to John's office. She was holding some papers in her hand and was visibly upset. "She told Public Safety that I assaulted her!" Mary shouted. "I can't believe that she said that I assaulted her! I didn't do anything to her! All that I did was pat her on her shoulder!"

John was in disbelief. He asked Mary to explain what she meant. Mary told him that Public Safety had contacted her and wanted her to come in and answer their questions. Jeanette had gone in to the station and reported that Mary assaulted her. John immediately went to Jeanette's office to try to talk to her. After he knocked on her door, he could hear her moving large objects around inside. Finally she partially opened the door.

"Jeanette, I was just informed that you told Public Safety that Mary assaulted you," John said. "Can we maybe talk about this? Did you really file a report against Mary?"

“Yes I did,” Jeanette replied. “She lunged at me and tried to choke me! I’m afraid for my safety whenever I’m at work. I know that she was the one who left that snake by my door, and left all of those threatening letters on the printer. She’s out to get me, and I’m scared that she may come in here again and try to hurt me. I’ve been blocking my door with my bookcase so that she can’t get to me.” With that, she shut her door.

John couldn’t believe what he had just heard. Jeanette’s statement to Public Safety sounded nothing like what she had originally said. She never told him anything about Mary attempting to choke her when he had spoken to her on the day of the incident. Both Mary and Jeanette had told Human Resources that Mary had only put her hand on Jeanette’s shoulder. Although John knew that Mary placing her hand on Jeanette legally qualified as assault, he really didn’t know what to think of this new, embellished version of the incident. He also could tell that he wasn’t going to be able to reason with Jeanette this time and that the situation was going to get worse. John was troubled by Jeanette’s unusual behavior and concerned that it may continue to escalate. He wondered if she was having some sort of a mental breakdown or if she might start making accusations against him or against others in the department. Several employees had even expressed concerns that she might be dangerous, but John worried that making any suggestions to Jeanette about speaking with a counselor might upset her even more. She had not made any verbal or physical threats to any of the employees and she usually kept herself barricaded in her office. As long as she was completing all of her work, what could he do?

Two weeks later, John received a subpoena to testify in the lawsuit that Jeanette was filing against Mary. As he held the subpoena in his hand John thought, “how did it get this far?”