

**LOCAL // CRIME**

# Texas Renaissance Festival founder, mayor accused of sexual harassment in federal lawsuit

**Rebecca Hennes**

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George Coulam, founder of the Texas Renaissance Festival, talks during a tour of the grounds Saturday, Oct. 12, 2019, in Todd Mission.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

A former employee of the Texas Renaissance Festival is suing the organization after claiming its founder and owner created a hostile work environment in which she was required to search dating websites and recruit women for him to meet in exchange for financial compensation.

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Toni Ewton of Conroe said she was wrongfully fired after she spoke out against recruiting women for George Coulam when she was his personal assistant for about three months, from December 2019 through February 2020, according to the federal lawsuit filed last week. The suit accuses Coulam -- who is the mayor of Todd Mission, where the festival is held -- of wrongful termination, sexual discrimination and sexual harassment.

The Texas Renaissance Festival declined to comment on the lawsuit. Coulam did not respond to requests for comment. He is not named as a defendant in the lawsuit.

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Ewton, 57, said during her time working for Coulam, at least two other people were hired as personal “scrollers.” The scrollers were tasked with helping “find women for a romantic

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Other “scrolling” duties included transcribing Coulam’s personal notes from his “dates” with the women, according to the suit. Ewton was also required to pay Coulam’s off-and-on-again girlfriend \$2,000 per week.

After Ewton told Coulam she felt sexually harassed, that the work environment was hostile and that she no longer wished to be involved with his online dating pursuits, she was “wrongfully terminated,” according to the suit.

The suit seeks punitive damages as well as back and front pay, lost benefits, costs relating to the lawsuit and compensatory damages for emotional distress and pain and suffering.

Coulam faced similar accusations in a previous lawsuit filed against the organization in 2018 by another former festival employee who served as his personal assistant from November 2015 through August 2016. In that federal lawsuit, Coulam is accused of asking his assistant to search dating websites, of bringing strippers to his home while staff members were there and of being verbally and physically abusive.

She said she was wrongfully terminated after she spoke out against his behavior. That lawsuit was settled in June 2019.

Gregg Rosenberg of the firm Rosenberg Sprovach, who represented the accuser in that case, said the terms of the settlement are confidential.

He is now representing Ewton.

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Rosenberg said his new client was unaware of the dating search duties when she was hired for the job and that the “scrolling” was “camouflaged by a lot of legitimate job duties.”

“This is something she had no clue she was going to have to end up having to do,” Rosenberg said

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A month after Ewton was required to start searching the dating websites, Coulam directed his attorney to make Ewton his medical power of attorney, a trustee to the George Coulam Foundation and a board member for Stargate Manor Arboretum, a private arboretum owned by Coulam, according to the suit. Stargate Manor is also listed as a defendant in the suit. Ewton said she had “no idea” why she was appointed to those positions and is unsure if they still stand. She added a previous personal assistant had

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In a separate federal suit in 2016, a former employee sued the festival, [accusing Coulam of sex and race discrimination](#), the Houston Chronicle reported. The ex-employee, a media relations director, said she was wrongfully terminated after opposing the alleged discrimination, which the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission later found evidence of but did not pursue a lawsuit. The agency issued a notice of right to sue, freeing the employee to take legal action on her own after negotiation failed.

The court dismissed the case in December 2017.

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