

# BEAUTY AND THE BEASTS

## THE NOT-SO-PRETTY FACE OF ESTEE LAUDER

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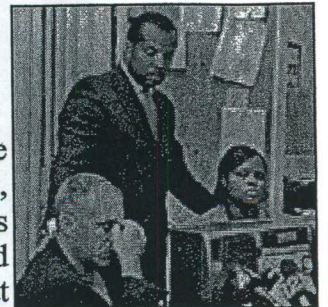
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For a company that thrives in the business of beauty, things are looking pretty ugly over at the Estee Lauder Companies Inc.

According to three former employees, life at the Melville office of the global cosmetics giant, which sells its wares through brands such as Clinique, Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karan and Aveda, largely consisted of fighting to stay afloat in a corporate culture that supported discrimination, racial slurs, obscenity and even attempted assault. They say that complaints fell on deaf ears—and would probably get you fired.



Plaintiffs Dan Russo and Yolanda Smith (seated) and attorney Frederick K. Brewington (standing center) listen to "The Tape"

"There's a smell coming from Estee Lauder and it's not perfume; it's the stench of discrimination," Frederick K. Brewington, attorney for the plaintiffs, tells the *Long Island Press*.

His clients—Dan Russo, 43, Yolanda Smith, 25, and Wayne Rogers, 44—recently filed a \$70-million lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Central Islip against Estee Lauder and several of its executives and supervisors. The suit claims seven counts of racial, disability and gender discrimination, and requests \$10 million in damages for each of the seven counts. That may sound like a lot of dough, but remember, the company being sued reported 2002 net sales of \$4.7 billion.

The lawsuit is the fifth employment discrimination suit filed against the company since 1996 in New York alone, according to public records, which only indicate the cases were closed. At the company's manufacturing plant in Bristol Township, New Jersey, a policy mandating that employees speak only English caused a ruckus. In 2001, a Manhattan hairdressing salon owned by the company was sued in federal court for firing a lesbian hairdresser over her "butchy" appearance.

For a taste of the work atmosphere the plaintiffs describe, consider one charge: In 1999, Dennis Burdjak, a director in the credit department, allegedly told Russo not to hire "the big fat Puerto Rican spic pig," referring to a Latino job applicant who is not part of the suit. Burdjak left the company in May 2002 and is also not listed in the suit.

A specialist at a local staffing firm who is familiar with Estee Lauder's LI operations tells the *Press*, "I'm not surprised in the least [by the