

Supreme Court hears Memorial University student's lawsuit against admin, former profs

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OTTAWA (CUP) — Wanda Young from Spaniards Bay, Nfld., had tears in her eyes as she left the Supreme Court of Canada building on Oct. 20. Young's lawsuit against Memorial University and two professors, Leslie Bella and William Rowe, went before seven Supreme Court judges in Ottawa on Thursday afternoon.

"My head is just spinning now, and I'm just happy it's over. We'll see what happens," Young said outside the trial room.

Her lawsuit was heard by Canada's highest court because it affects how people report suspicion of child abuse, and the relationship between professor and student.

Young was investigated for child sexual abuse after she submitted a paper without proper footnotes. The paper contained a first-hand account of a woman sexually assaulting the children she babysat, taken from a textbook on the subject.

Her professor Leslie Bella assumed the appendix was a cry for help from Young, and reported her to Child Protection Services.

Child Protection Services had difficulty dealing with the case — it was passed between several different social workers — and took over two years to be fully investigated. Information about the case was also spread throughout Young's community, and the RCMP was contacted.

Young claims that she was not accepted into Memorial's school of social work because of the investigation, and was refused other

jobs because she was red flagged as a sexual offender.

A Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court jury awarded Young \$840,000 in damages for defamation and lost wages in October 2003. However, the decision was overturned a year later by Newfoundland's appeal court.

Jack Strawbridge, from Memorial University's administration was present at the Supreme Court hearing to listen and report back to his board of directors.

"We're very concerned about what happened to Wanda Young," said Strawbridge. "It's real, what happened to her shouldn't have happened."

But Strawbridge says a similar problem could happen again, because of the way people are obliged to report child abuse.

Strawbridge says the case has been an, "uphill fight" for the university, with media coverage taking Young's side and treating Memorial as a faceless institution.

Professor Leslie Bella took an early retirement in December 2004. Strawbridge said the case has had a profound affect on her.

"There are all kinds of victims in a case like this," said Strawbridge.

The Child Welfare League of Canada was allowed to make arguments supporting Memorial University's side as an intervener in the case.

Michael Barrack, the child league's lawyer, said that the government should mandate people to report any evidence of child abuse, and

leave the investigation up to the authorities.


"We are prepared to accept nine incorrect reports if we get one correct report," Barrack told the judges.

Young's lawyer, Gillian Butler, said in court that the professors did not follow Newfoundland's laws and

immediately report all the information they had. She said the negligence of the university is not erased because of the Child Welfare Act.

The Supreme Court of Canada typically takes four months to deliver judgment. Lawyers for both sides of the case declined comment after the trial.



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