

## *Two Election Workers Targeted by Pro-Trump Media Sue for Defamation*

The two Georgia workers were falsely accused of manipulating ballots by Trump allies and right-wing news sites. Election officials said the workers did nothing wrong.



By Reid J. Epstein

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Two Georgia election workers who were the targets of a right-wing campaign that falsely claimed they manipulated ballots filed a defamation lawsuit on Thursday against one of the nation's leading sources of pro-Trump misinformation.

The suit against the right-wing conspiratorial website The Gateway Pundit was filed by Ruby Freeman and her daughter, Shaye Moss, both of whom processed ballots in Atlanta during the 2020 election for the Fulton County elections board. It follows a series of defamation claims filed by elections equipment operators against conservative television operators such as Fox News, Newsmax and One America News.

The lawsuit from Ms. Freeman and Ms. Moss is among the first to be filed by individual election workers who found themselves unwittingly dragged into the alternate universe of far-right media that claimed, and still does, that Donald J. Trump won last year's presidential election.

"I want the defendants to know that my daughter and I are real people who deserve justice, and I never want them to do this to anyone else," Ms. Freeman said in a statement.

Ms. Moss, who continues to work for the Fulton County elections board, and Ms. Freeman, a temporary employee during the 2020 election, were ensnared by the Trump-supporting media and Mr. Trump himself after Gateway Pundit published dozens of false stories about them, starting last December and continuing through this November. The stories called the two women "crooked Democrats" and claimed that they "pulled out suitcases full of ballots and began counting those ballots without election monitors in the room."

Investigations conducted by the Georgia secretary of state's office found that the two women did nothing wrong and were legally counting ballots.

It all began one month after the 2020 election, on Dec. 3, when a lawyer for Mr. Trump's campaign played a spliced segment of surveillance video footage for a Georgia Senate committee. The lawyer falsely claimed Fulton elections workers pulled 18,000 fraudulent ballots from a suitcase and illegally fed them through the voting machines.

The accusation, which was quickly debunked by Fulton County and Georgia elections officials, was nevertheless amplified by Rudolph W. Giuliani and other Trump allies. A week after the first Gateway Pundit story, Mr. Giuliani compared Ms. Moss and Ms. Freeman to drug dealers and called for their homes to be searched during a hearing with Georgia state legislators.

Mr. Trump himself invoked Ms. Freeman's name 18 times during his Jan. 3 call with Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state. The call at the time was among the president's most egregious efforts to overturn the results of the election he lost to Joseph R. Biden Jr., who defeated Mr. Trump in Georgia by 11,779 votes.

The Gateway Pundit is published by twin brothers, James and Joseph Hoft. The Hoft brothers did not respond to requests for comment. In April, the brothers spent 57 minutes articulating their myriad false theories about the 2020 election for Regent University, the Virginia school founded by Pat Robertson.

"We have to have Americans' trust in their elections," James Hoft said. "We just hope and pray that there's a divine intervention and something takes place to save this country and save our elections."

On Thursday, James Hoft acknowledged the lawsuit on the Gateway Pundit site and asked readers to send him money to fight it.

The lawsuit, filed in a Missouri circuit court in St. Louis, where James Hoft lives, articulates a litany of trauma the two women and their family suffered after Gateway Pundit began its campaign against them.

They received death threats, unending harassment from phone calls and text messages, and unsolicited pizza deliveries to their homes. Ms. Freeman and Ms. Moss, both of whom are Black, were also subjected to racial slurs.

The harassment was detailed in a Reuters article published Wednesday that included recordings of 911 calls Ms. Freeman made when Trump supporters came to her home and banged on her door last December.

According to Reuters, Ms. Moss earns about \$36,000 a year for her full-time job with Fulton County. Ms. Freeman, a temporary worker, was paid \$16 per hour. Ms. Freeman was forced to shut down her online business selling fashion accessories once she became inundated with threats.

On Jan. 6, as thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington for a rally that led to the storming of the Capitol in an effort to block the congressional certification of Mr. Biden's victory, another crowd surrounded Ms. Freeman's home in suburban Cobb County, "some on foot, some in vehicles, others equipped with a bullhorn," the suit read.

But, according to the lawsuit, Ms. Freeman had by then fled her home on the advice of the F.B.I. She did not return to her home for two months.

The harassing calls to Ms. Moss came on a cellphone she had given her teenage son. He turned the phone's cellular data off to stop the unsolicited calls, but he was unable to do so during school hours. He used the phone as a mobile hot spot to connect his computer to the internet for his virtual high school classes during the coronavirus pandemic.

Her son failed his classes; Ms. Moss enrolled him in summer school to catch up, according to the suit.

Ms. Freeman and Ms. Moss are represented in their suit by Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan group focused on resisting authoritarianism in the United States. Protect Democracy has also sued Project Veritas, the conservative group that conducts undercover sting operations, on behalf of a Pennsylvania postmaster who was falsely accused of tampering with election returns.

Ms. Freeman and Ms. Moss did not specify an amount they are seeking from the Hoft brothers. They asked for compensatory and punitive damages "to be determined at trial."

Reid J. Epstein covers campaigns and elections from Washington. Before joining The Times in 2019, he worked at The Wall Street Journal, Politico, Newsday and The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

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