

Car Dealer Faces Race Bias Lawsuit

Navajo Woman Says Sale Refused

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A woman who says an Albuquerque car dealer wouldn't sell to her because she is Navajo has filed a civil rights lawsuit.

In the suit, filed last week in U.S. District Court in Albuquerque, Laura Chee alleges that Southwest Hyundai's general manager repeatedly said he couldn't sell her a car because she was Native American.

Bill Miller, the general manager named in the lawsuit, said he doesn't remember the incident and hasn't heard of the court case.

"I've never refused to sell to somebody because they are Native American," Miller said.

Chee, who lives north of Gallup, went to Southwest Hyundai in November to buy a car for her daughter, according to the suit. She showed one of the salesmen a newspaper ad featuring the car she wanted and told him she would buy it, the suit alleges.

The salesman then took her driver's license and went inside to get the keys so she could test the car. When the salesman returned 10 minutes later, he told Chee that she had to talk to Miller, according to the suit.

Miller told Chee that because of a new law, "we can't sell to Native Americans," the suit alleges.

Chee told Miller that she did not live on the Navajo Reservation, which means she wouldn't be covered by the new Navajo Consumer Protection Act, which has made

some dealers concerned about selling to Navajos. Chee also told Miller she was going to pay for the car in cash and did not need a loan, the suit alleges.

Miller said he doesn't discriminate against Native Americans but that car dealers do have concerns about the new Navajo law.

The law, which took effect in July, sets maximum annual interest rates for loans at 18 percent; requires used-car dealers to provide buyers with a 30-day, 1,500-mile warranty; and gives buyers 10 days to return a vehicle for a full refund "on the basis of any complaint whatsoever" about its quality.

The law, which applies to residents of the reservation, also voids a contract and prevents the dealer from repossessing the vehicle if a merchant "takes advantage of the lack of knowledge, lack of formal education, ignorance (or) illiteracy."

The law caused an uproar among car dealers, mobile home dealers and bankers near the Navajo Reservation. But Chee's lawsuit was the first that Ray Berube, president of the New Mexico Automotive Dealers Association, had heard of possible problems in Albuquerque.

Miller said the law doesn't mean he won't sell to Navajos, but it can influence a deal.

"We have asked that they (customers) waive those rights," he said of the consumer protection act. "We can't meet those restrictions. It makes it difficult for me from a business standpoint."