

## 'Personal to Me': Gibson Dunn Associate Takes on Disability Discrimination

By Emily Saul

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**A**s a child, Alon Sugarman was inspired to become a lawyer when, following an amputation due to childhood cancer, his school failed to make accommodations for his disability.

Now a lawyer himself, the Gibson Dunn associate is representing a former New York City Corrections Officer in a lawsuit against a landlord over similar conduct.

Gurdial Pardesi, who is disabled, filed suit in Manhattan federal court last week, alleging his landlord "repeatedly obstructed, delayed, and rejected" his requests for a reasonable accommodation. Robert Galpern, Louis Galpern, Elliot Galpern and entities associated with the building are named as defendants.

Pardesi, 73, first began seeking a transfer to an apartment on the ground floor, or in an elevator building, over 10 years ago. He has lived in his fifth-floor walk-up for more than 43 years.

Following his most recent surgery in May, Pardesi has been recuperating in a nursing

home, as he is unable to ascend the stairs to his apartment.

Defendants have not only ignored the requests or failed to meaningfully engage. In a phone call, the complaint alleges that Louis Galpern told one of Pardesi's attorneys that his client was not "truly" disabled.

"This is really personal to me," Sugarman told the New York Law Journal. "I have experienced what Mr. Pardesi has gone through."

Sugarman was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma at age 6 and underwent treatment while in elementary school. He lost a leg. But when he was ready to return to the 4th grade, there was a dispute about his right to an accommodation.

His father's friend, Ellis Robin, represented his family in litigation, and Sugarman was able to return to his school and his friend groups.



Gibson Dunn & Crutcher  
Associate Alon Sugarman.

In remission for decades, the attorney now gets around on crutches and sometimes with a wheelchair. Sugarman said his personal experience helps him advocate in this case in a unique way.

“Overlap with life experiences gives an ability to advocate in a creative way,” he said.

“Everyone has different barriers in their lives, and part of overcoming those obstacles is what gives you insight,” he stated.

The fifth-year associate put his hand up for pro bono work without realizing he would be handling Pardesi’s suit, he said.

Gibson Dunn partner Christopher Belelieu is also on the case, which the firm is working in partnership with Legal Services NYC attorney Sarah Smith.

The lawsuit alleges that defendants are violating the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, in addition to New York state and city anti-discrimination laws.

“Mr. Pardesi’s numerous physical ailments and Defendants’ failure to accommodate his disability has taken a toll on his physical health and emotional well-being,” per court papers. “Mr. Pardesi has become a prisoner in his own home, and is unable to enjoy basic life experiences like shopping, seeing friends, or worshipping [sic] with his religious community.”

Pardesi first sought a transfer to an accessible unit in 2014. He was told he would lose his rent-stabilized status. He declined, the suit says, and there was no meaningful engagement until he retained legal services.

Since, defendants have suggested that they would install a chair-lift in the building’s 33-inch stairwell.

Chairlifts, the complaint clarifies, are designed for short sets of stairs, not for ascent and descent of four stories.

Lawsuits like this aren’t filed everyday because the disputes are typically resolved as part of an interactive process, said Belelieu.

“Someone like Mr. Pardesi is not going to be forced to suffer in silence,” said Belelieu. “People who are not willing to follow the clear letter of the law, which we think is the case here, will have to stand up in open court and explain why.”

The action asks a court to order Pardesi receive a reasonable accommodation and seeks damages and attorneys fees.

Counsel for defendants has not yet entered an appearance. The Galperns did not return messages, nor did lawyers who have represented the Galperns or the entities in other disputes.