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Court Rules Ousted Broward Judge Can't Sue JQC Members, Bar Prosecutors

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Former Broward Circuit Judge Laura Watson [lost her case](#) against members of the Judicial Qualifications Commission and Florida Bar lawyers whose work led to her disbarment.

Watson alleged the attorneys violated her constitutional rights and conspired against her in judicial and attorney disciplinary proceedings. She was [removed](#) from the bench in 2015 for unethical work during her private-practice days, and the Florida Bar [permanently revoked](#) her license earlier this year.

U.S. District Judge Marcia Cooke dismissed Watson's lawsuit Friday, ruling JQC members and Florida Bar prosecutors are immune to lawsuits over work they do in those roles, just as judges and criminal prosecutors are.

Watson "does nothing to show that the JQC investigative panel members' functions were not similar to the role of prosecutors, or that the defendants stepped outside their roles such that absolute immunity would not attach to that action," Cooke wrote.

The former judge's allegations that her rights were violated were not sufficient to pierce the veil of that immunity, Cooke added.

The discipline against Watson stemmed from her involvement in a secret insurance litigation settlement that didn't designate any money for several other attorneys retained on the case. Her firm, Watson & Lentner, was one of the recipients of a \$14.5 million settlement from Progressive Insurance Co. on behalf of health care providers. Watson & Lentner paid clients \$361,000 and kept more than \$2 million for itself, leaving out other attorneys who later sued Watson, her firm and anyone else who received attorney fees.

A judge then reallocated \$3 million for the other attorneys at Stewart Tilghman Fox Bianchi & Cain in Miami and two solo practitioners. Stewart Tilghman attorney Larry Stewart filed complaints with the JQC and the Florida Bar, and the saga ended in disbarment for Watson, her ex-husband and former law partner Darin Lentner, and father-and-son attorneys Charles and Harley Kane.

In her lawsuit against the JQC members and bar prosecutors, Watson claimed Stewart exercised undue influence over the proceedings against her. His law partner was friends with a JQC lawyer, who then withheld emails from Watson that could have helped her defense, she alleged in the 99-page complaint that included 1,800 pages of appendices.

But Cooke ruled the emails are protected by prosecutorial immunity and did not appear to include exculpatory evidence.

"The emails certainly show that Mr. Stewart was immensely interested in [Watson]'s case before the JQC and constantly communicated with members of the JQC and the Florida Bar," Cooke wrote. "However, the emails contain nothing about the underlying charges for which [Watson] was removed from judicial office being false."

Tampa attorney Lanse Scriven, a partner at Trenam who is on the Florida Bar board of governors, represented the 19 defendants from both the JQC and the bar. He declined to comment on Cooke's order. His Trenam colleague Anne Connelly Leonard also represented the JQC defendants, and Michael Moody of Greenberg Traurig in Tallahassee defended the Florida Bar lawyers.

Watson, who represented herself, did not respond to a request for comment. The order closes a three-year battle that included a failed attempt by Watson to get her case heard before the U.S. Supreme Court.

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