

Court disbars Van Camp

Prominent Spokane attorney misled client over fees, high court rules

The Washington Supreme Court disbarred a prominent Spokane attorney Thursday after his client complained the lawyer charged him \$25,000 to settle a minor dispute over the lease price of a car.

The high court ruled unanimously to uphold the disbarment of Russell Van Camp, who has represented National Right to Life advocates and anti-abortion activists throughout the West. The court said he misled his client about the nature of the \$25,000 fee and didn't follow through with the client's desire to quickly settle the case.

"Van Camp violated his duty to advise and inform his client ... and to be honest with his client," Justice Charles Johnson wrote. "He used a fee agreement he knew to be ambiguous, failed to explain the basis for his fees, and charged an unreasonable fee.

"He did this knowingly and intentionally for his own benefit."

Johnson cited "numerous aggravating factors, including similar prior discipline and bad faith obstruction of the disciplinary process," to support disbarment.

Van Camp presented himself as a larger-than-life character who boasted of making hundreds of thousands of dollars in the early 1990s at the same time the Internal Revenue Service hounded him for back taxes. He once drove a Corvette with "Torts" license plates and infamously was caught by his wife in bed with an anti-abortion client, whom he later married.

"I've been doing this for 38 years. I've had a wonderful practice, and I've been able to help lots and lots of people," Van Camp said Thursday. "If you are really successful you make enemies, also. But the Supreme Court has ruled, and I will have to accept that."

Van Camp, 64, an attorney since 1973, has represented many clients in headline-grabbing cases. They include a man in 2007 who claimed he bit into a wire inside a McDonald's hamburger, and a Chattaroy woman who sued Southwest Airlines in 2004, saying employees humiliated her in front of other passengers because of her weight.

His undoing came when he agreed to represent Randy Honkala, described in court records as a car enthusiast, who obtained a "power lease" for \$5,000 that gave him purchasing priority for a Shelby Mustang from Wendle Motors.

Honkala claimed the Mustang was delivered in poor condition and the dealership refused to refund the lease payment. As a result, Honkala began writing derogatory statements online about Wendle, which then sought legal action in federal court against Honkala.

Honkala hired Van Camp, who charged him \$25,000. According to court records, Van Camp on Dec. 15, 2006, called Wendle's attorney, Richard Campbell, and joked that Campbell should send him a box of chocolates for all the money Campbell was going to make on the case.

After a lengthy representation that netted no results, and after Van Camp refused to explain the legal costs, Honkala filed a grievance in July 2007 with the Washington State Bar Association.

That body's disciplinary board found that Van Camp committed six violations of bar rules, including evidence that he altered billing statements to justify the so-called flat rate fee he charged Honkala. It recommended disbarment for the serious harm Van Camp's actions brought to the legal profession.

Van Camp was censured in 1985 for charging an unreasonable fee. He was suspended for six months in 2002 for making a false statement in his bankruptcy proceeding, and was reprimanded in 2005 for using the same ambiguous fee language later used in the Honkala case.

Despite that history, Van Camp appealed the disciplinary board's action to the Washington Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously to uphold disbarment.

"The hearing officer found that Van Camp knowingly deceived his client with the ambiguous fee agreement and that the fee arrangement was drafted expressly and knowingly by Van Camp for his own benefit," Johnson wrote.