

Supreme Court of Texas
June 26, 2015

Beeman v. Livingston

No. 13-0867

Case Summary written by Allison Grayson, Online Edition Editor.

JUSTICE JOHNSON delivered the opinion of the Court.

Laura Beeman sued the executive director of TDCJ, Brad Livingston, claiming that Livingston violated Chapter 121 of the Texas Human Resources Code by failing to provide Beeman and another deaf inmate with proper ways of participating in inmate activities and telephone calls. More specifically, Beeman argued “Livingston failed to provide her with reasonable access to the telephone system used by inmates to make telephone calls to family and friends, and failed to provide sign language interpreters to allow her to meaningfully participate in educational, religious, and other programs at the prison.”

In making this allegation, Beeman alleged Livingston acted ultra vires in his failure to provide accommodations, creating an exception to any sovereign immunity Livingston might have as the executive director of TDCJ. In response, Livingston entered a plea to the jurisdiction, “arguing the Code does not clearly and unambiguously waive immunity.”

The trial court denied Livingston’s plea and instead granted a temporary injunction forcing Livingston to provide certain services to Beeman. Thereafter, the court of appeals reversed the claims for want of subject matter jurisdiction.

Issue: Are TDCJ prisons included in the definition of public facilities under Chapter 121 of the Texas Human Resources Code?

In this instance, the Court affirmed the decision by the court of appeals, stating that “[w]hile Chapter 121 is not a model of clarity, [the Court ultimately agreed] with the court of appeals that construing the term ‘public facility’ to include prisons does not reflect legislative intent as expressed in the term’s definition and the statute as a whole.”

Although the statute gives descriptions of what might fall under the definition of a public facility, including college dormitories or other educational facilities, the Court explained that nothing in the statute indicates “that the Legislature also intended to include prisons in the

definition.” Further, if the Legislature intended to include prisons, it would have included prisons in the statute, and could easily do so in the future through an amendment to the Code.

Taking all of this information into consideration, the Court determined that Livingston was subject to sovereign immunity and did not act ultra vires in failing to provide special accommodations to deaf inmates. Therefore, the Court affirmed the decision by the court of appeals.

Royston, Rayzor, Vickery & Williams, LLP v. Lopez

No. 13-1026 & 14-0109

Case Summary written by Allison Grayson, Online Edition Editor.

JUSTICE JOHNSON delivered the opinion of the Court.

Francisco Lopez sought the representation of Royston, Rayzor, Vickery, & Williams, LLP (the firm) in his divorce. The contract between the two parties included an arbitration provision.

After the firm filed for divorce on Lopez’s behalf, the parties were ordered to attend mediation. The parties ultimately settled. Thereafter, Lopez sued the firm “claiming the firm induced him to accept an inadequate settlement.” In response, the firm moved to compel arbitration.

After the trial court denied the firm’s motion, the firm “filed both an interlocutory appeal challenging the denial under the Arbitration Act, and an original proceeding seeking mandamus relief under common law.” The court of appeals affirmed the trial court’s decision and denied mandamus relief.

In its analysis, the court of appeals determined that Lopez’s claims fell within the scope of the agreement. Then, the court examined Lopez’s affirmative defenses to arbitration. Looking at whether the arbitration provision was unconscionable, the court determined that Lopez need only prove the provision was procedurally unconscionable or substantively unconscionable, not both. The court of appeals concluded the provision was unenforceable based on its substantive unconscionability.

“In cause number 13-1026, [the firm sought] relief from the court of appeals’ judgment denying its interlocutory appeal, and in cause number 14-0109, it [sought] mandamus relief directing the trial court to

order arbitration.” In response, Lopez urged the Court to affirm the previous decisions because “(1) the court of appeals correctly determined that an arbitration provision need not be both procedurally and substantively unconscionable to be unenforceable, and this provision [was] substantively unconscionable because it [was] excessively one-sided; (2) the arbitration provision was entered into in the context of Lopez’s agreeing to become a client of the law firm, and given that context it violates public policy; (3) Lopez’s status as a prospective client shifted the burden of proof to [the firm] to establish it met its ethical obligation to explain the effects of the arbitration provision to him and [the firm] did not do so; and (4) the arbitration provision [was] illusory because it [allowed the firm] to avoid arbitration as to its fee disputes while requiring Lopez to arbitrate all his disputes.”

In explaining its reversal of the court of appeals’ decision, the Court stated that arbitration provisions in an attorney-client contract are not “presumptively unconscionable.” Further, the Court argued that parties asserting defenses to arbitration clauses have the burden of proving unconscionability.

Because the provisions in question related to the contract as a whole, the Court refrained from deciding whether the provisions were unconscionable. The Court explained that “challenges relating to an entire contract will not invalidate an arbitration provision in the contract; rather, challenges to an arbitration provision in a contract must be directed specifically to that provision.”

While Lopez argued that the arbitration provision was one-sided because it forced him to arbitrate, but allowed the firm to choose whether to arbitrate or litigate, the Court argued that this was not true. In fact, the Court determined that the “provision equally [bound] both parties to arbitrate claims within its scope and [ensured] that the same rules [applied] to both parties[.]” Therefore, Lopez failed to show the arbitration provision was substantively unconscionable.

Furthermore, in response to Lopez’s urging that the firm failed to fully explain the agreement, the Court declined to require that attorneys explain arbitration provisions in attorney-client employment contracts to prospective clients. The Court explained that prospective clients who sign contracts containing arbitration provisions “are deemed

to know and understand the contracts' content and are bound by their terms on the same basis as are other contracting parties."

Discussing the idea of illusory promises, the Court stated that "the fact that the scope of an arbitration provision binds parties to arbitrate only certain disagreements does not make it illusory." Moreover, an arbitration clause is not illusory just because it is one-sided.

Based on the above-mentioned considerations, the Court reversed the court of appeals' decision in cause number 13-1026 and remanded the cause to the trial court. The Court also denied the writ of mandamus in cause number 14-0109.

JUSTICE GUZMAN, joined by JUSTICE LEHRMANN and JUSTICE DEVINE, concurring.

Justice Guzman wrote to "emphasize the need for rules more specifically delineating the means and methods by which attorneys can discharge their ethical responsibilities in this context." While the Disciplinary Rules do not specifically speak to arbitration agreements, attorneys must generally provide enough information to allow the client to make an informed decision. In her concurrence, Justice Guzman argued that the rulemaking process would be the best forum for achieving more clarity in how best to discharge such responsibilities.

Cantey Hanger, LLP v. Byrd

No. 13-0861

Case Summary written by Allison Grayson, Online Edition Editor.

JUSTICE LEHRMANN delivered the opinion of the Court, in which JUSTICE GUZMAN, JUSTICE BOYD, JUSTICE DEVINE, and JUSTICE BROWN joined.

In 2006, Philip Byrd and Nancy Simenstad filed for divorce. Simenstad was represented in the divorce proceedings by Cantey Hanger. The divorcing couple ultimately settled in 2008 and the trial court entered an agreed divorce decree. "The decree awarded Simenstad three aircraft as her separate property, including a Piper Seminole that had been owned by Lucy Leasing Co., LLC, a company the decree awarded to Byrd." In addition, the decree "made Simenstad responsible for all ad valorem taxes, liens, and assessments on the aircraft." The

decree also required the parties to execute any documents necessary for transfer of ownership within ten days.

Byrd, Lucy Leasing, and PGB Air, Inc. (the Respondents) sued Simenstad and Cantey Hanger, alleging that Simenstad and Hanger falsified a bill of sale, which transferred the Piper Seminole to a third party. The Respondents argued that Cantey Hanger “falsified the bill of sale in order to shift tax liability for the Piper Seminole from Simenstad to Byrd in contravention of the decree.”

In response, Cantey Hanger “moved for summary judgment on attorney-immunity grounds, arguing that it owed no duty to Byrd or the other plaintiffs and that as a matter of law it was not liable to the plaintiffs for actions taken in the course and scope of its representation of Simenstad in the divorce proceeding.” The Respondents argued that Cantey Hanger failed to discharge its duties, and therefore, was not protected on attorney-immunity grounds.

The trial court granted the motion for summary judgment and dismissed all claims against Cantey Hanger with prejudice. “The court of appeals reversed as to the fraud, aiding-and-abetting, and conspiracy claims relating to the sale of the plane.” The court of appeals explained its decision stating that the sale of the plane had nothing to do with the divorce decree, and therefore, was outside the scope of Cantey Hanger’s representation of its client.

Issue: Whether “Cantey Hanger [conclusively proved] that its alleged conduct with respect to the sale of the plane was part of the discharge of its duties in representing Simenstad in the divorce proceedings or, instead, was independent of the divorce and foreign to the duties of an attorney.”

In its explanation of the attorney-immunity defense, the Court argued that a general fraud exception to the defense would significantly undercut its purpose. Further it stated that “merely labeling an attorney’s conduct ‘fraudulent’ does not and should not remove it from the scope of client representation or render it ‘foreign to the duties of an attorney.’”

Additionally, the Court explained that an attorney pleading the attorney-immunity defense has the burden to prove the conduct in question fell under the scope of discharging its duties to its client. The defense does not depend on whether or not the wrongful conduct was fraudulent. Here, the Court determined that the alleged conduct fell

under the scope of Cantey Hanger's legal representation of Siminestad. Therefore, the Court reversed the portion of the court of appeals' judgment relating to the fraud claims and reinstated the trial court's judgment.

JUSTICE GREEN joined by CHIEF JUSTICE HECHT, JUSTICE JOHNSON, and JUSTICE WILLETT, dissenting.

Justice Green dissented to explain his position that the attorney-immunity defense must be used to except conduct occurring during litigation. Justice Green argued that the Court's interpretation of the doctrine resulted in "a much broader, more expansive liability protection." Justice Green therefore stated that he would affirm the court of appeals' judgment because Cantey Hanger failed to "establish that its alleged conduct occurred in litigation."