

Today: Early showers, breezy, mild.
High 72. Low 49. Wind 8-16 mph.
Tuesday: Mostly sunny, breezy, mild.
High 70. Low 47. Wind 8-16 mph.
Yesterday: Temp. range: 67-77.
Pollen count: N/A. Details on Page B2.

Racial Bias Suit Stirs Debate at Bell Atlantic

*Firm Says Its Workforce
Is a 'Reflection of Society'*

By Kirstin Downey Grimsley
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Willie Bennett, a black 27-year veteran at Bell Atlantic Corp. in Pennsylvania, said the final straw came at a company party in 1995: His white co-workers showed him a video they made in which a white co-worker wearing an Afro wig pretended to be Bennett and was portrayed as getting his job because of his basketball-playing skill, he recalled.

Derrick Williams, of Alexandria, a 23-year employee at Bell Atlantic, said he is haunted by the memory of finding a fake and crudely racist job application in the copier machine at a company office in Baileys Crossroads six years ago. The form, which purports to be a job application for black job candidates, asks questions such as "name of father (if known)," whether the applicant was born in a "charity hospital" or a "back alley," and asks how many words the candidate can "jive" per minute.

Both men said their supervisors did nothing when they complained.

"I tried to bring it to the attention of a supervisor," Williams recalled. "They said don't worry about it. They didn't even investigate. They didn't think it was important."

According to Bennett and Williams and the 124 Bell Atlantic workers who have joined them in a class-action racial discrimination lawsuit against the company, these incidents were not isolated events. In interviews and in the lawsuit filed last year in federal court in the District, workers from the Washington area, Pennsylvania, New

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Racial-Discrimination Class-Action Suit Stirs Debate Over Workplace Behavior

BELL ATLANTIC, From A1

Jersey and West Virginia allege that over approximately the past seven years they have been subjected to racial epithets, racist slights and unfair treatment by management and co-workers.

Bell Atlantic spokesmen said they are investigating the allegations raised in the lawsuit, but did not deny them. "It's a huge corporation," Bell Atlantic spokesman Eric Rabe said. "Any corporation that said it couldn't happen would be unrealistic."

Rabe and others acknowledged some cruel and racist behavior may have occurred at company facilities but that management does not condone or tolerate it. "A company of our size is a reflection of society," he said, adding that company officials "don't want people to be humiliated or abused."

Bell Atlantic officials said they have a strong commitment to hiring and promoting minorities, and they said they believe Bell Atlantic's record on diversity issues is good. Of its 57,000 employees, 23 percent, or 13,400, are black, and of its 22 top executives, four are black, the company says, including the group president for consumer and business services and three of the seven people who head Bell Atlantic's state operations. They also say the com-

pany has held regular meetings for rank-and-file workers to discuss these issues and operates a hot line for complaints.

"Does Bell Atlantic have a set of policies intending consciously to discriminate? Absolutely not," said Bruce Gordon, the group president for consumer and small business, a black executive who has been with Bell Atlantic since 1968. But he added, referring to the lawsuit, "if this is a way to learn, so be it."

Gordon said the lawsuit may prove valuable tool for exposing behavior, such as the alleged incidents involving the video and the job application, which Gordon called "totally unacceptable." He said "nothing like that has [previously] been brought to my attention, and that blatant mean-spirited behavior has no place at Bell Atlantic."

Gordon said he believes racism remains a problem for Bell Atlantic, as it does throughout society. "Racism may have different characteristics than it did in 1968, but it still exists. Bell Atlantic is a microcosm of society, and I have to assume there are race-based incidents at Bell Atlantic," Gordon said.

James R. Young, vice president and general counsel of Bell Atlantic, said he could not discuss the specific allegations in the case because it is "currently in litigation." But he said the company is investigating, and

has found "instances where people behaved in ways they shouldn't."

"We'll look at these allegations," Young said. "If there's something there, we will make it right." He added that "some disciplinary actions have already been taken, but I can't get into that now."

In instances in the past in which workers have used racial epithets "they've been fired," Young said. Within the past two months, for example, the company fired six workers who were exchanging racist e-mail messages, company spokesmen said.

Young said supervisors are held accountable as well. "We've disciplined supervisors for failing to take disciplinary actions against subordinates who did these things," Young said.

Several of the black workers who are suing say that many individual incidents over the years began to add up to them to what they perceive to be an intentional pattern of racism at the telecommunications company. Initially, they said, they were fearful of complaining individually, but several decided two years ago to get together to discuss their experiences in a group.

On one summer night in 1995, four workers met to talk in a room at the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria. The second time they gathered, 18 black Bell Atlantic employ-

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