

At Hechinger, Times of Turmoil

Company's Retooling Produces Employee Anger—and Suits Alleging Bias

By Kirstin Downey Grimsley
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Hudie Fleming was 25 years old and had a freshly minted marketing degree from Howard University when he joined the Hechinger Co. home improvement retail chain in 1965. It had only eight stores.

In the next 29 years, as Hechinger grew into a national company with more than 120 stores, Fleming became the company's first black store manager, in 1974. While he ran the Hechinger Mall store in Northeast Washington it became one of the Landover-based chain's most profitable operations.

Now Fleming, 54, and several dozen former Hechinger employees, many of whom worked for the company for decades, have alleged in lawsuits that Hechinger discriminated against them because of their race and age.

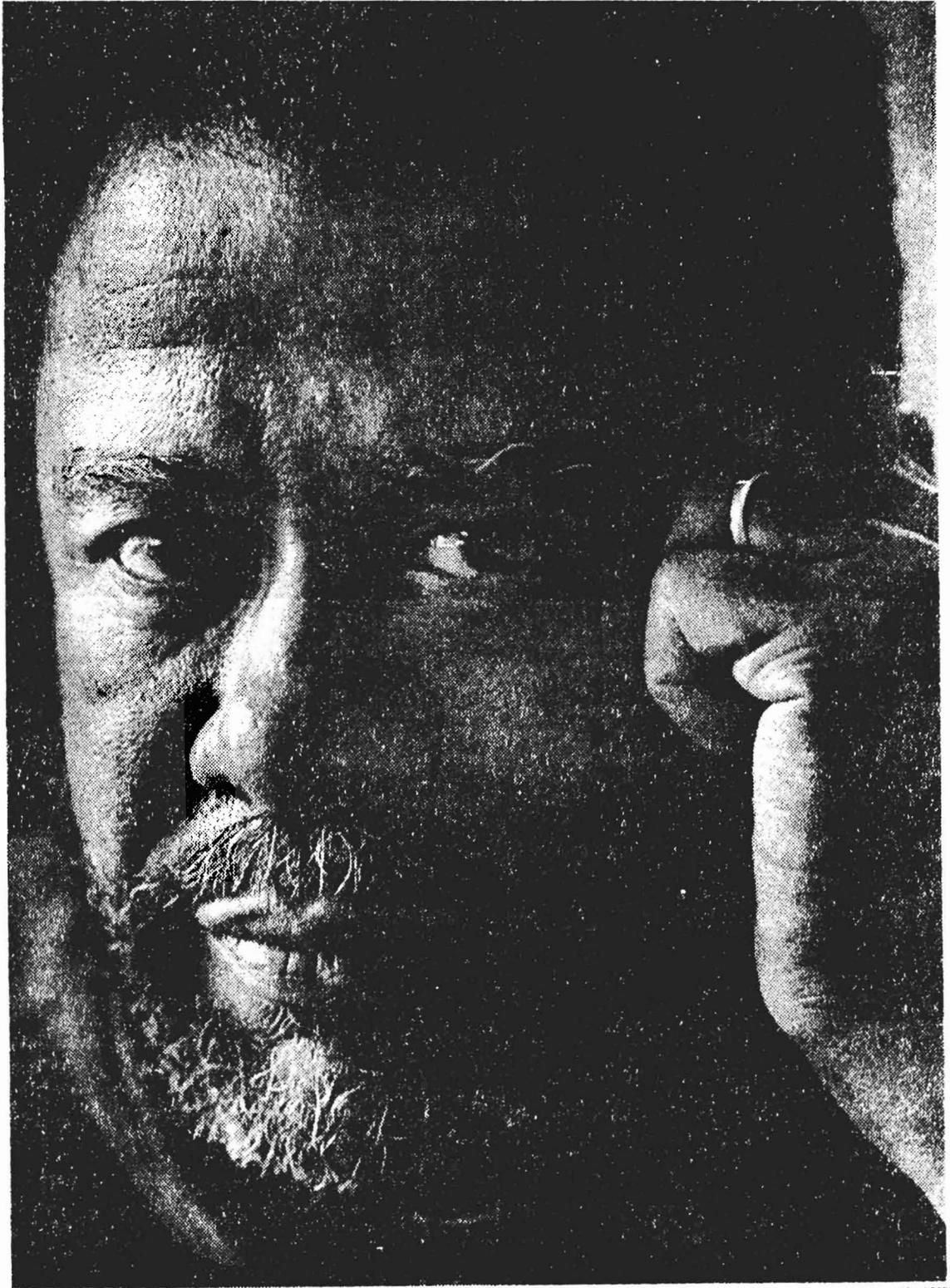
Hechinger executives and attorneys express sympathy for the former employees, but deny the allegations in the lawsuits and say they are making decisions based on the marketplace of the 1990s. They said they did not want to discuss specific cases because the lawsuits are pending.

"I certainly have feelings for some of the people who are suing us," said Clark McClelland, Hechinger executive vice president. "It's a very sad situation. The root cause of it is that the company has gone through changes."

Hechinger executives and attorneys say they believe the courts will find the allegations to be unfounded. They also say that in the handful of cases that were reviewed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the government agency found no evidence of discrimination.

The lawsuits filed by employees and former employees are a sign of discontent at Hechinger just as it shows progress in its bruising battle against tough new competitors, primarily Atlanta-

See HECHINGER, F5, Col. 1



Hudie Fleming, who in 1974 became Hechinger's first black store manager, is one of several dozen former employees who have alleged in lawsuits that Hechinger discriminated against them because of their race and age. "It's sad, because the company was my heart and soul," Fleming said.

BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST