

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA)
)
 COUNTY OF BEAUFORT)
)
 EDDIE B. LEWIS)
)
 Plaintiff,)
)
 v.)
)
 SAUL, LLC and WELLS FARGO BANK)
 NATIONAL ASSOCIATION,)
)
 Defendants.)

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
 FOURTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Case No.: 2018-CP-07-02378

**ORDER ON WELLS FARGO'S
 MOTION TO SET ASIDE JUDGMENT
 PURSUANT TO RULE 60, SCRPC**

RECEIVED

Oct 14 2021

SC Court of Appeals

Presiding Judge:
 Plaintiff's Attorney:
 Defendant's Attorney,
 Saul, LLC:

 Defendant's Attorney,
 Wells Fargo Bank:
 Date of Hearing:
 Court Reporter:

Hon. Deadra L. Jefferson
 Cory Fleming, Esq.

 John Dodds, Jr., Esq. and
 Morgan Templeton, Esq.

 Douglas E. Leadbitter, Esq.
 March 17, 2020 & March 23, 2021
 Karen Andersen

This matter came before the Court on Defendant Wells Fargo Bank, NA's ("Wells Fargo") Motion to Set Aside Judgment pursuant to Rule 60, SCRPC, filed March 19, 2021. Wells Fargo asks the Court to reconsider its Order Granting Saul, LLC's Motion for Summary Judgment, filed March 24, 2020. The Court received a copy of the Motion to Set Aside Judgment on March 23, 2021 via email from the Beaufort County Clerk of Court.¹ Defendant Saul, LLC ("Saul, LLC") filed its response to Wells Fargo's Motion to Set Aside Judgment on March 31, 2021. The Plaintiff filed his response to Wells Fargo's Motion to Set Aside Judgment on July 2, 2021. Wells Fargo filed its Memorandum in Support on July 6, 2021. Saul, LLC filed its Reply on July 9, 2021. After consideration of the record, as well as the various interests balanced by the Court at the time of the

¹ This Motion was sent to the Court by the Clerk of Court's Office as it perceived it to be in the nature of a Motion for Reconsideration of Judgment. Although this Court did not retain jurisdiction of this matter, it is in the best posture to dispose of the Motion, as this Court heard the underlying Motion for Summary Judgment giving rise to the present Motion to Set Aside Judgment.

ruling, the Motion to Set Aside Judgment is Granted and the Court's March 24, 2020 Order Granting Saul, LLC's Motion for Summary Judgment is Vacated.²

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

This matter originally came before the Court on March 17, 2020 on Saul, LLC's Motion for Summary Judgment, filed January 20, 2020. Present and appearing on behalf of the Plaintiff was Cory Fleming, Esq. Present and appearing on behalf of Saul, LLC was John Dodds, Jr., Esq. No counsel of record appeared for Wells Fargo. Mr. Fleming advised the Court that on the Friday immediately preceding the hearing, March 13, 2020, he received an email from Laura Robinson advising that she was resigning from the firm and that on March 16, 2021, this case was being assigned to Charles Blackburn, Esq. Audio Transcript of March 17, 2020 Hearing at 1:14:30-1:14:58. Mr. Fleming stated that he believed Mr. Blackburn communicated with Morgan Templeton, lead counsel for Saul, LLC, wherein Mr. Blackburn indicated that he could not be present at the hearing "for various reasons." Id. at 1:15:00-1:15:15.³

At the time of the hearing, it was represented to the Court by Mr. Fleming that Wells Fargo's presence was not necessary to dispose of the Motion for Summary Judgment. Id. at 1:16:00-1:16:10. Moreover, Mr. Fleming conceded that he did not disagree with Saul, LLC's interpretation of the lease, and conceded that Saul, LLC's position on summary judgment was

² This Motion is disposed of without the necessity of a hearing and decided on the record and briefs. Rule 59(f), SCRCP; Pollard v. City of Florence, 314 S.C. 397, 401-402, 444 S.E.2d 534, 536 (Ct. App. 1994) and pursuant to the Chief Justice's April 3, 2020 Order, As Amended August 27, 2021, Section (d), citing the June 15, 2021 Amendment, Section (c)(4). However, the Court held two (2) conference calls with counsel to afford the Plaintiff and Defense counsel time to resolve the matter without the necessity of the Court ruling on the merits of the motion. Counsel for Saul, LLC failed to see the wisdom of this option and declined the opportunity.

³ In conjunction with this motion it was subsequently revealed that Laura Robinson sent an email to Cory Fleming and Morgan Templeton on March 13, 2020, advising that Ms. Robinson was resigning from the firm that represents Wells Fargo, and seeking Mr. Fleming and Mr. Templeton's consent to continue the March 17, 2020 hearing. See Exhibit A to Wells Fargo's Memorandum in Support. Mr. Fleming consented to a continuance of the hearing, and Mr. Templeton did not. Id. At the hearing the Court was never made aware and was not privy to the request by Ms. Robinson or the communication between counsel regarding the issue. If the Court had been aware of Ms. Robinson's request it would have been granted. Subsequently, the Court was advised that Charles Blackburn resigned from the firm shortly after Ms. Robinson's departure.

supported by the terms of the lease, South Carolina law, and the facts of the case. Id. at 1:24:50-1:26:18. Based on that concession, and the Plaintiff and Defendant Saul LLC's representation that they consented to the relief sought, the Court instructed Mr. Dodds to prepare a proposed Consent Order granting summary judgment between Lewis and Saul, LLC for the Court's consideration. Id. at 1:26:20-1:26:35.⁴ The Court instructed Mr. Dodds to copy all counsel of record on the submission of the proposed order to the Court.⁵ Id. Mr. Fleming advised that he had no objection to the relief sought in the proposed order or the verbiage contained therein.

The Court issued the Consent Order Granting Summary Judgment on March 24, 2020. Wells Fargo filed the present Motion to Set Aside Judgment on March 19, 2021. For the following reasons, Wells Fargo's Motion to Set Aside Judgment is head and respectfully Granted, and the Court's March 24, 2020 Order Granting Saul, LLC's Motion for Summary Judgment is Vacated.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

On motion and upon such terms as are just, the court may relieve a party or his legal representative from a final judgment, order, or proceeding for the following reasons: (1) mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or excusable neglect; (2) newly discovered evidence which by due diligence could not have been discovered in time to move for a new trial under Rule 59(b); (3) fraud, misrepresentation, or other misconduct of an adverse party; (4) the judgment is void; (5) the judgment has been satisfied, released, or discharged, or a prior judgment upon which it is based has been reversed or otherwise vacated, or it is no longer equitable that the judgment should have prospective application.

Rule 60(b), SCRCP.

“The motion shall be made within a reasonable time, and for reasons (1), (2), and (3) not more than one year after the judgment, order or proceeding was entered or taken... This rule does

⁴ The Court perceived the parties' representation to be that the agreement they reached regarding the grant of the Motion for Summary Judgment limited relief to the parties that were present at the hearing and represented that as being Lewis and Saul, LLC.

⁵ The Court's staff received the proposed consent order granting summary judgment on March 18, 2020 from Mr. Dodd's staff. Laura Robinson was copied on the email. However, Charles Blackburn was not.

not limit the power of a court to entertain an independent action to relieve a party from a judgment, order, or proceeding, or to set aside a judgment for fraud upon the court.” Id. “[W]hen considering whether to grant relief from final judgments, a court must balance the interest of finality against the need to provide a fair and just resolution of the dispute.” Raby Const., L.L.P. v. Orr, 358 S.C. 10, 20, 594 S.E.2d 478, 483 (2004) (internal citations omitted).

“A party seeking to set aside a judgment pursuant to Rule 60(b) has the burden of presenting evidence entitling him to the requested relief. Whether to grant or deny a motion under Rule 60(b) is within the sound discretion of the trial judge.” Perry v. Heirs at L. of Gadsden, 357 S.C. 42, 46–47, 590 S.E.2d 502, 504 (Ct. App. 2003).

I. The Motion to Set Aside Judgment is Granted.

Rule 60(b)(3), SCRCP permits a judgment to be vacated for fraud, misrepresentation, or other misconduct of an adverse party. It was represented to the Court at the hearing on March 17, 2020, that the Plaintiff and Defendant Saul, LLC had no objection to Saul, LLC being dismissed from the case, and that Wells Fargo was not necessary for the disposition of Saul, LLC’s Motion for Summary Judgment.

However, the overwhelming majority of the findings of fact and conclusions of law contained in Saul, LLC’s Consent Order to the Court contained a myriad of findings regarding the interpretation of the lease between Saul, LLC and Wells Fargo and liability findings that related not to Saul, LLC and the Plaintiff, but to Wells Fargo, a party who was not present at the March 17, 2020 hearing and was not afforded an opportunity to be heard. And most importantly, that Lewis and Saul, LLC knew Wells Fargo was not going to be present for the hearing on the motion. The findings contained in the Order do not simply hold that Saul, LLC is not liable for the Plaintiff’s injuries. Rather, the findings contained in the Order interpret a lease, determine

culpability for the Plaintiff's cause of action and assign liability for the Plaintiff's injuries to Wells Fargo. This is particularly troubling in light of the fact that counsel for Lewis and Saul, LLC knew that Wells Fargo's representation was in flux, objected to Wells Fargo's request for a continuance, and did not advise the Court that Wells Fargo sought a continuance.⁶

Rule 60(b)(1), SCRPC permits a judgment to be vacated for mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or excusable neglect. In determining whether to grant relief under Rule 60(b)(1), the court must consider: "(1) the promptness with which relief is sought; (2) the reasons for the failure to act promptly; (3) the existence of a meritorious defense; and (4) the prejudice to the other party." Rouvet v. Rouvet, 388 S.C. 301, 309, 696 S.E.2d 204, 208 (Ct. App. 2010). To establish a meritorious defense, the party does not have to show he would prevail on the merits, but rather, the defense "need be only one which is worthy of a hearing or judicial inquiry because it raises a question of law deserving of some investigation and discussion or a real controversy as to real facts arising from conflicting or doubtful evidence." Williams v. Watkins, 384, S.C. 319, 326, 681 S.E.2d 914, 917-18 (Ct. App. 2009) (citing McClurg v. Deaton, 380 S.C. 563, 575, 671 S.E.2d 87, 93-94 (Ct. App. 2008)).

"[A] party has a duty to monitor the progress of his case. Lack of familiarity with legal proceedings is unacceptable and the court will not hold a layman to any lesser standard than is applied to an attorney." Hill v. Dotts, 345 S.C. 304, 310, 547 S.E.2d 894, 897 (Ct. App. 2001). "[W]here a Rule 60(b) motion is filed shortly after the movant becomes aware of the basis therefor and there is no evidence of unreasonable delay, the motion is timely." Ex Parte Carter, 422 S.C.

⁶ While it was incumbent upon Wells Fargo to file a Motion for Continuance, the Court is nevertheless troubled that Saul, LLC failed to advise the Court of Wells Fargo's request for continuance when Saul, LLC was aware of the transition of Wells Fargo's representation. This is heightened by Lewis and Saul, LLC's knowledge that Wells Fargo would not be represented and Mr. Blackburn would not be able to attend the hearing on March 17, 2020.

623, 631, 813 S.E.2d 686, 690 (2018). However, “[t]he one year limit is a non-discretionary mandate . . .” Coleman v. Dunlap, 303 S.C. 511, 402 S.E.2d 181, 183 (Ct. App. 1991), reversed, 306 S.C. 491, 413 S.E.2d 15 (1992).

Saul, LLC’s Motion for Summary Judgment was heard on March 17, 2020 and a Consent Order granting that motion was entered on March 24, 2020. Attorney for Wells Fargo, Douglas Leadbitter, filed a motion to set aside the judgment on March 19, 2021. Thus, Leadbitter made his motion within the allotted time period. Furthermore, this Court finds that Leadbitter made his motion within a reasonable time, not exceeding one year. With the transition of Wells Fargo’s representation that occurred, this Court finds that Leadbitter sought relief as soon as he discovered this judgment had been entered against Wells Fargo. With respect to the meritorious defense factor, as stated above, Saul, LLC’s Order contained findings of fact that interpreted a lease, determined culpability for the Plaintiff’s cause of action and assigned liability for the Plaintiff’s injuries to Wells Fargo without the knowledge or consent of Wells Fargo. As such, this Court finds that Wells Fargo has shown the existence of a meritorious defense. Williams v. Watkins, 384, S.C. 319, 326, 681 S.E.2d 914, 917-18 (Ct. App. 2009) (citing McClurg v. Deaton, 380 S.C. 563, 575, 671 S.E.2d 87, 93-94 (Ct. App. 2008)). Finally, this Court finds that the degree of prejudice the Plaintiff and Saul, LLC will suffer if relief is granted is not so high as to outweigh the other factors.⁷ Wells Fargo was a party to the March 17, 2020 hearing, however, was not present at the hearing and was not afforded an opportunity to be heard. Both the Plaintiff and Saul, LLC knew that Wells Fargo would not be represented at the March 17, 2020 hearing and, therefore, this Court finds little prejudice in requiring the parties to proceed with a hearing on the merits of Saul, LLC’s Motion for Summary Judgment. “This is consistent with South Carolina’s policy favoring the disposition

⁷ Prejudice is defined as the lack of notice or knowledge which inhibits the ability to refute. Rouvet v. Rouvet, 388 S.C. 301, 312-13, 696 S.E.2d 204, 209-10 (Ct. App. 2010).

of issues on their merits rather than on technicalities.” Micronics, Inc. v. South Carolina Department of Revenue, 345 S.C. 506, 511, 548 S.E.2d 223, 226 (Ct. Appt. 2001) (citing Columbia Pools, Inc. v. Galvin, 288 S.C. 59, 339 S.E.2d 524 (Ct. App. 1986)); see Doe v. Batson, 345 S.C. 316, 322, 548 S.E.2d 854, 857 (2001) (citing Baughman v. American Tel. & Tel. Co., 306 S.C. 101, 112, 410 S.E.2d 537, 543 (1991) (“Summary judgment is a drastic remedy, which should be cautiously invoked so that no person will be improperly deprived of a trial of the disputed factual issues); see also Curry v. Carolina Insurance Group of SC, Inc., 428 S.C. 60, 70, 832 S.E.2d 760, 764-65 (Ct. App. 2019) (quoting Spence v. Wingate, 395 S.C. 148, 156, 716 S.E.2d 920, 925 (2011) (“Because summary judgment is a drastic remedy, it should be cautiously invoked to ensure that a litigant is not improperly deprived of a trial”).

CONCLUSION

After fully considering the Defendant Wells Fargo's Motion to Set Aside Judgment, filed March 19, 2021 the Court finds pursuant to Rule 60(b)(3) and (b)(1), SCRCPP and fundamentally in the interests of justice that the relief is Granted and the Court's Order dated March 24, 2020, is **VACATED**. Accordingly, the Motion to Set Aside Judgment is heard and respectfully **GRANTED**.⁸

AND IT IS SO ORDERED.

Hon. Deadra L. Jefferson
Presiding Judge

September _____, 2021
Charleston, South Carolina

⁸ The common please non-jury clerk is hereby directed to schedule the Defendant Saul, LLC's Motion for Summary Judgment filed January 20, 2020 on the next available motions roster so that it can be heard and disposed of on its merits.



Beaufort Common Pleas

Case Caption: Eddie B Lewis Jr VS Saul Llc , defendant, et al

Case Number: 2018CP0702378

Type: Order/Set Aside Judgment

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/D.L. Jefferson Ninth Judicial Circuit Judge 2128