

Nielsen settles federal lawsuit by executive who alleged racism blocked promotions

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By [Maudlyne Ihejirika](#) Mar 21, 2021, 2:50pm CDT
Chicago Sun Times

Nielsen Holdings has settled the federal discrimination lawsuit filed against the company by its former senior vice president of U.S. strategic community alliance and consumer engagement, Cheryl Grace, after the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference launched a national protest against the company that tracks and sells information on consumer habits.

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Nielsen Holdings has settled a [federal discrimination lawsuit by a Chicago-based, Black female executive](#) who had accused the company of racism, according to a civil rights group that had launched protests against the data-tracking firm.

The agreement with Cheryl Grace, Nielsen's former senior vice president of U.S. strategic community alliance and consumer engagement, bans both sides from disclosing its terms.

The Atlanta-based [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#), co-founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, had targeted Nielsen in a series of protests planned as part of a yearlong campaign against corporate racism. The organization accused Nielsen of racial bias in promotion and retention of executives of color, based on allegations in Grace's blockbuster October lawsuit.

Nielsen tracks and sells information on consumer habits. Grace has been credited with founding Nielsen's high-profile annual reports highlighting the buying power of Blacks, Hispanics and Asians, becoming the national face of the firm in multicultural consumer relations.

Grace's lawsuit alleged racial bias in the C-suite had blocked her efforts to climb the ranks, despite consistently high performance. And she alleged that after sharing concerns with Nielsen CEO and chief diversity officer David Kenny, she was marginalized and subjected to a hostile work environment.

"This is a breakthrough moment. I commend Nielsen for doing the right thing. I think they took the SCLC and the movement very seriously," the group's President/CEO Dr. Charles Steele Jr. told the Chicago Sun-Times.

Steele had flown into Chicago with supporters for [a Feb. 16 demonstration planned outside the downtown offices of the company](#) — but a blizzard canceled it.

The group in December initiated negotiations, hoping to resolve issues identified in the suit. In launching the national protest, it said Nielsen broke off talks — “not just with SCLC, but with Ms. Grace also. They would not comm

unicate with her attorney,” Steele said.



Dr. Charles Steele, President and CEO, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Provided

“After 17 years of critical work connecting Nielsen to the Black community and other communities of color, they were comfortable slapping her in the face, which equaled a slap in the face to the Black community and communities of color,” Steele added.

“We were not going to sit back and tolerate this type of racism. We wrote to Nielsen’s chairman and CEO. We met with them. We urged them to settle this lawsuit. And in just a few months, Nielsen has decided to resolve it. So our work is done.”

Nielsen has asserted the suit by Grace had no merit.

The company had not responded to a weekend request for comment. In February, a Nielsen spokeswoman said: “Nielsen has not discriminated or retaliated against Ms. Grace in any way. Nielsen believes that fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our workforce and products is the right thing to do, and crucial to the success of our business and all businesses.”

After the settlement, Grace on Thursday announced via social media her resignation from Nielsen and the launch of her own executive coaching and consulting firm.

In launching the yearlong campaign, The Leadership Conference said America's reckoning with racism must go beyond [statements](#) made by corporations in wake of the death of George Floyd, a Black man, under the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis — to actually eradicating bias in hiring and promotion. As such, the civil rights group is moving on to a soon-to-be announced second target of protests.

SCLC had pointed to [a 2019 report by Good Jobs First](#) that found a majority of American corporations, including 99 of the Fortune 500, had paid plaintiffs in at least one employment discrimination or harassment lawsuit since 2000.

Last year [brought a wave of such lawsuits](#). According to Good Jobs First, most end in confidential settlements — like Grace's — that fail to change the corporate culture.