

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE 11TH
JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, IN AND FOR
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

COMPLEX BUSINESS DIVISON

CASE NO. _____

MICHAEL STERN and JDS Development
Group, LLC,

Plaintiffs,

v.

JOHN DOE,

Defendant.

_____ /

COMPLAINT

Plaintiffs Michael Stern and JDS Development Group, LLC (“JDS”) (collectively, “Plaintiffs”), sues Defendant John Doe (“Defendant”) and alleges:

NATURE OF THIS ACTION

1. Michael Stern is a highly successful real estate developer based in Miami. He is responsible for several of the most striking new real estate developments in New York City and South Florida, including the The Brooklyn Tower, 111 West 57th Street, The American Copper Buildings, Walker Tower, 888 Brickell Avenue, 1 Southside Park, and Monad Terrace. Stern and the company he leads, JDS Development Group, LLC (“JDS Development”), have made beautiful homes for many thousands and made substantial money for investors, partners, and others in the industry.

2. However, someone—likely a competitor—has engaged in a coordinated smear campaign across several social media platforms and created a website designed solely to spread false and defamatory information about Mr. Stern and JDS Development. The perpetrator has

taken pains to disguise their identity. Through this lawsuit, plaintiffs will uncover who is defaming them and hold them accountable.

PARTIES

3. Plaintiff Michael Stern is a citizen of the State of Florida domiciled in Miami, Florida. He is the founder and CEO of JDS Development Group, LLC.

4. Plaintiff JDS Development Group, LLC is a real estate development, construction, and acquisition firm headquartered in Florida with its principal place of business at 120 NE 27th Street Miami, FL 33137.

5. Defendant John Doe is an individual who drafted, edited, registered, published, or aided and abetted the drafting, editing, registration, or publication of JDSpulse.com and affiliated social media pages. Plaintiff is currently unaware of Doe's name or identity, and therefore sues Defendant by a fictitious name. Plaintiff intends to identify Doe through discovery in this action, including subpoenas to those publishing the website, and will amend this Complaint to allege the true names and capacities of Doe when ascertained.

JURISDICTION

6. This action is for damages to be established but the smear campaign has targeted Plaintiffs' significant investments in New York and Florida.

7. The amount in controversy exceeds \$750,000.00, exclusive of interest, costs, and attorneys' fees.

8. Under Florida Statute § 47.011, venue is proper because the defamation cause of action accrued in Miami-Dade County, where Mr. Stern resides and JDS has its principal place of business.

9. All conditions precedent to the maintenance of these claims have been performed, excused, waived, or performance would be futile.

FACTS

I. Plaintiffs Build a Real Estate Empire

10. Over several decades, Michael Stern and JDS Development have created some of the highest-quality real estate development projects in both New York and Miami. Plaintiffs have built a strong reputation in the real estate industry as successful, effective, and honest developers.

II. Plaintiffs are Targeted By an Anonymous Smear Campaign

11. On March 15, 2025, the website JDSpulse.com appeared on the internet, in tandem with an affiliated accounts on X,¹ Facebook,² and Instagram.³

12. The website makes several demonstrably false—and highly defamatory—claims about Plaintiffs:

- “Welcome to the website dedicated to exposing the fraudulent activities of Michael Stern.”
- “Michael Z. Stern (born June 13, 1979) is an American real estate developer with a documented criminal history, notorious for his fraudulent schemes[.]”
- “[H]is business model has been plagued by unethical practices, financial misconduct, and fraudulent dealings.”
- “Michael Stern is not just a developer—he is a convicted felon, a fraudster, and the subject of multiple lawsuits related to financial scams, threats, and criminal schemes. His business empire is built on deception, forged documents, and financial manipulation[.]”
- The website posted a false and highly negative “research report” from the investigative firm Rosetti Starr that accused JDS Development and Mr. Stern of various wrongdoing.

¹ <https://x.com/JdsPulse>.

² <https://www.facebook.com/p/Jds-Pulse-61573922141892/>.

³ <https://www.instagram.com/jdspulse/>.

13. These allegations are false. Mr. Stern has never committed fraud against anyone, he is not a “convicted felon,” and he has not committed any of the other wrongs claimed on the website. Whoever is behind the website and accompanying social media accounts made up lies specifically to damage Plaintiffs and their reputations. The perpetrator(s) likely understand that Plaintiffs depend very heavily on their reputations in the course of their profession as real estate developers—including raising equity investments and borrowing substantial funds from banks and others to fund their development projects—and that false allegations of fraud will be highly damaging to Plaintiffs. Indeed, they have been, as the website has already been the subject of several unpleasant conversations between Plaintiffs and current and prospective investors.

14. Defendant has taken extensive steps to hide their involvement. For example, Defendant hosted the site on Namecheap.com, a Phoenix, Arizona-based web service that employs an Iceland-based proxy service called “Withheld for Privacy” to protect registrants’ identities. According to the *New York Times*, Withheld for Privacy is a “virtual offshore haven for some of the world’s worst perpetrators of identity theft, ransomware, disinformation, fraud and other wrongdoing” that abuses Iceland’s protective data privacy laws to help website owners “cover their tracks from prying regulators, law enforcement officials or victims.”⁴ Likewise, the site makes no mention of any creator. Its “Contact” page contains a blank submission form, with the request: “If you are deceived investor and are ready to maintain confidentiality, please contact us.”

15. Plaintiffs have tried to ascertain the Defendant’s identity, including through hiring private investigators and by contacting a suspected author of the website with a document preservation notice and retraction demands. The publication of these defamatory statements on the

⁴ Steven Lee Myers and Tiffany Hsu, *Some of the Web’s Sketchiest Sites Share an Address in Iceland*, New York Times (Oct. 15, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/09/business/iceland-online-disinformation-identity-theft.html>

internet establishes that at least one individual has written and published them, meaning that there is a defendant that exists and can be identified. Armed with subpoena power, after filing this lawsuit, Plaintiffs will uncover the identity of the author or authors, publisher or publishers, or both.

16. The website's author made the above false statements with actual malice, as evidenced by their:

- Failure to give Plaintiffs a fair opportunity to reply to, and correct, their false and defamatory allegations;
- Failure to report exculpatory facts, including but not limited to that Plaintiffs have never been convicted of fraud, and in fact have never had even an adverse civil judgment entered against them;
- Knowledge of these exculpatory facts, which conflict with their defamatory statements;
- Ill will toward Plaintiffs. On information and belief, Defendant is a competitor or disgruntled former employee who harbors personal grudges against Plaintiffs;
- Preconceived determination to disparage Plaintiffs. The website and social media sites clearly specify their intent to harm Plaintiffs;
- Repetitive attacks on Plaintiffs. On information and belief, Defendants also created and maintained an X account, @MzssternC48466, that both impersonated and defamed Stern. On March 6, 2025, X moderators removed the account for violating the platform's rules regarding impersonation.

17. Defendant knew that, and targeted their allegations to inflict maximum harm. For example, Defendant used the JDSPulse X account to spread the website's defamatory statements to Plaintiffs' close business contacts in an apparent attempt to make them cut ties. Defendant replied to an X post by the South Florida Business Journal with the message: "If you are contemplating investment in projects associated with JDS Development and its principal, Michael Stern, jdspulse.com provides information alleging fraudulent activities involving Michael Stern

and his affiliated entities.” Defendant has also advertised the website in replies to X posts by Bloomberg, Crain’s New York, the Real Deal, and a long list of prominent real estate agents and brokers.

18. Defendant’s targeted defamatory campaign has severely damaged Plaintiffs’ business and reputations. In real estate, reputations are critically important, as any project’s success is contingent on substantial investments and loans from a wide array of stakeholders. Any negative publicity, regardless of its obvious falsity, can imperil those investments and loans. This was Defendant’s precise goal, and they achieved it.

COUNT I

Count 1: Defamation *Per Se*

19. Plaintiffs repeat, re-allege, and incorporate by reference the allegations in Paragraphs 1-18 as if set forth fully herein.

20. On March 15, 2025, Defendant published the following false statement about Stern on their website, JDSPulse.com:

- “Welcome to the website dedicated to exposing the fraudulent activities of Michael Stern.”
- “Michael Z. Stern (born June 13, 1979) is an American real estate developer with a documented criminal history, notorious for his fraudulent schemes[.]”
- “[H]is business model has been plagued by unethical practices, financial misconduct, and fraudulent dealings.”
- “Michael Stern is not just a developer—he is a convicted felon, a fraudster, and the subject of multiple lawsuits related to financial scams, threats, and criminal schemes. His business empire is built on deception, forged documents, and financial manipulation[.]”

21. By publishing JDSPulse.com, Defendant published these false statements to third parties who have read the website. Because JDSPulse.com targeted real estate investors and other

industry members, those third parties who viewed JDSPulse.com were Stern's close business contacts.

22. Defendant repeated the false claims on the X account @JDSPulse and on Facebook.

23. Once again, these false statements were targeted directly at Stern's investors and other business contacts.

24. These statements are of and concerning Stern.

25. These statements are statements of false facts and are reasonably understood as statements of false facts—specifically, as assertions that Stern has engaged in fraud and other criminal conduct.

26. These statements are categorically and demonstrably false based on publicly available records. Stern has never committed fraud, and never engaged in criminal conduct.

27. The falsity of the statement is bolstered by Defendant's failure to mention that: 1) Plaintiffs have never been subject to an adverse legal judgment, 2) Plaintiffs have never been convicted of any crime.

28. The statements are defamatory, and people who heard them understood it to be defamatory, because they tend to injure Plaintiffs' reputation, lower it in the estimation of their community and deter third parties (including investors and other business contacts) from associating or dealing with them, exposes them to public hatred, contempt, ridicule, and financial injury, and impeaches their honesty, integrity, virtue, and reputation.

29. The statements are defamatory *per se*, and people who heard them understood them to be defamatory *per se*, because, without reference to extrinsic evidence and viewed in their plain and obvious meaning, they allege that Plaintiffs engaged in fraud and other criminal conduct, which injures them in their trade and profession.

30. Defendant knew the substantial danger of injury to Plaintiffs and their reputation from the statements, which is readily apparent, and in fact intended to cause injury to Plaintiffs by making the statements.

31. For the reasons set forth in detail above, Defendant made the defamatory statements with actual malice, including with actual, subjective awareness of their falsity.

32. Defendant had no applicable privilege or legal authorization to publish the statements, or, if they did, they abused that privilege or authorization.

33. As a direct and proximate result of Defendant's false statements, Plaintiffs have suffered substantial economic damages.

34. As a direct and proximate result of Defendant's false statements, Plaintiffs have suffered substantial reputational damage and have had to spend considerable sums of money to correct the public record about their actions and mitigate the reputational harm they has suffered, including costs incurred in hiring legal counsel to clear their names in the court of public opinion.

35. Defendant published the statements maliciously, willfully, wantonly, with common law malice, with actual malice, with a conscious, reckless, and willful indifference to Plaintiffs' rights, and with a desire to cause injury to Plaintiffs. Accordingly, punitive damages are appropriate.

36. In view of the foregoing, Plaintiffs are entitled to actual, presumed, and punitive damages in amounts to be determined at trial.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs respectfully request that the Court enter judgment in their favor and against Defendant for compensatory damages, exemplary damages, interest, costs, and such further relief as the Court deems proper.

Date: April 25, 2025

Respectfully submitted,

By: /s/ Grace L. Mead

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