

Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

# Fur flies over woman's animal rights protest

## VIRGINIA BEACH

At 71, Sheila Rybak doesn't consider herself imposing.

The Virginia Beach resident with a soft-spoken English accent is an animal-rights activist who has tallied more than 30 years of protests.

For more than a decade, she's concentrated on Lowenthal Furriers, often showing up on the nearby public sidewalk during the cold-weather months, chanting slogans like: "Your fur had a face."

But last year, one Lowenthal customer had enough.

Maria P. Folch took legal action against Rybak, swearing out a criminal complaint against her. Rybak was eventually arrested and charged with disturbing the peace.

But when the matter came to court, Folch didn't show. So Rybak sued her for malicious prosecution.

"It had everything to do with the right of the public to protest without someone going off and filing a frivolous criminal complaint," said Rybak's attorney, Kevin Martingayle.

Earlier this week, a Virginia Beach jury found in Rybak's favor, awarding her \$12,500 in damages.

The incident began Jan. 17, 2009, when Folch arrived at the store around noon, according to court documents. While turning off Virginia Beach Boulevard into the parking lot, she saw Rybak participating in an anti-fur demonstration. Folch reportedly said that Rybak began yelling at her that she was killing animals and that "it did not matter how many furs you have, you will still be ugly."

She described Rybak's expression as "that of a crazed and enraged person."

Folch called 911.

"There's some people picketing Lowenthal's and every time the customers come out of the establishment with their furs, they start yelling... and saying that and 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' " Folch said, according to a transcript of the 911 conversation. "And I don't need to be harassed."

Police responded but saw nothing illegal and left.

Later that day, Folch went to a magistrate and swore out a criminal complaint against Rybak.

She added some details that she did not mention during the 911 call, such as that Rybak had called

her names and approached her in a menacing way, Martingayle said.

But Rybak said that doesn't describe how she protests.

"That is not what we do," Rybak said. "We don't scream profanity. We don't cause conflict. We don't disturb the peace."

Neither Folch nor her attorney could be reached for comment. A call for comment to Lowenthal on Friday was not returned.

A month after the protest, Rybak returned from a trip and was issued an arrest warrant for disturbing the peace. She said she had no idea what it was about. The only thing she could think of was that perhaps her neighbors had complained about her feeding the ducks.

It turned out to be a result of Folch's complaint.

Rybak went to police headquarters, where she was arrested, fingerprinted and questioned about her citizenship.

"All you have to do is get upset at a person, and you exaggerate a little bit, and 'Poof!' you're arrested," Rybak said.

But when Rybak's court date came up last March, Folch didn't come to the hearing. According to testimony from the civil trial, she was out of the state caring for an ill relative, Martingayle said.

The charge of disturbing the peace was dismissed, but Rybak had to shell out \$850 for an attorney and a court reporter.

She sued Folch for malicious prosecution.

"Rybak now fears that she may be subject to false charges and arrested because she chooses to exercise her right of public protest," the court filing said.

Rybak, who says the whole episode has cost her about \$1,500, said she thought the jury verdict was fair.

The lawsuit was more about protecting her rights than the money, she said.

And if Folch doesn't have the money to pay the judgment, Rybak has another idea: "She can give me her full-length mink coat that she's so proud of."

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**Source URL (retrieved on 10/26/2010 - 15:25):** <http://hamptonroads.com/2010/03/fur-flies-over-womans-animal-rights-protest>