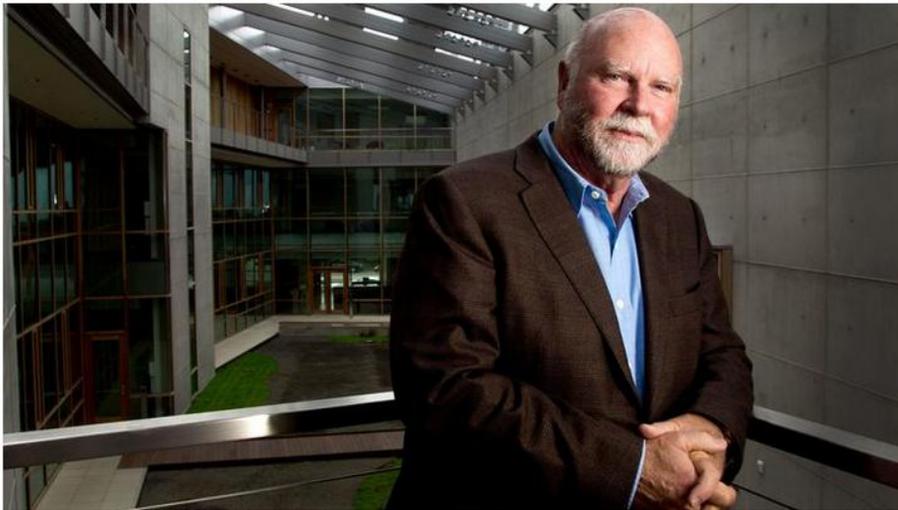


## Synthetic Genomics hit with gender discrimination suit



September 19, 2017



By **Bradley J. Fikes** · Contact Reporter

A former attorney for a prominent La Jolla biotech has sued the company, alleging gender discrimination against her and other female employees. The company, Synthetic Genomics, said it will fight the lawsuit because it is without merit and against its principles of diversity.

Teresa Spehar filed the lawsuit Sept. 7 in San Diego Superior Court. Spehar, Vice President of Intellectual Property until being fired on June 20, is asking for unspecified damages to be determined at trial.

The complaint says Spehar and other women were routinely discriminated against in various ways at Synthetic Genomics. Examples include receiving less pay than men, less frequent promotions, being excluded from meetings and being “denigrated with gender-based stereotypes.”

J. Craig Venter, the famed genomics pioneer and a company co-founder, is alleged in the lawsuit to have participated in the discriminatory treatment.

Spehar incurred the company's ill will after complaining about the discriminatory treatment, said [Josh D. Gruenberg](#), one of Spehar's attorneys.

As a result of being fired for "bogus reasons," Spehar has suffered substantial losses in earnings and employment opportunities, along with emotional distress, the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit has been assigned to Judge Judith F. Hayes. A civil case management conference is scheduled for 10 a.m. March 2.

As of 2 p.m. Tuesday, Synthetic Genomics said it had not been served with the lawsuit. The Union-Tribune provided a copy it received from Gruenberg for comment.

"While I cannot specifically comment on ongoing litigation, what I can tell you is I passionately believe it is without merit and we will vigorously defend the claims made in the lawsuit," Synthetic Genomics CEO Oliver Fetzer said in an emailed response.

Synthetic Genomics employs digital technology to enhance and automate life processes for commercial uses, part of the vision of digitizing life espoused by Venter, the co-founder.

Products include a workstation that takes in DNA sequences and produces the specified DNA, a prototype that produce a variety of biological molecules from their sequences, and a device that quickly determines whether an engineered gene would actually be functional when inserted into a living organism.

Spehar was responsible for safeguarding all the intellectual property for Synthetic Genomics' inventions, indicating she played a critical role for the company, the lawsuit said.

Not only Spehar, but female employees in general were treated with disrespect, the lawsuit states. For example, it alleges that Venter made a sexually inappropriate remark to a female former executive, Michele Champagne, while placing an arm around her.

No male employees of Synthetic Genomics raised concerns with the behavior, the lawsuit says.

Champagne is expected to be a witness, as well as others, said Gruenberg, the Spehar attorney.

Fetzer said Synthetic Genomics treats its employees with respect, but like many other companies, it has been dealing with gender parity issues.

"Specific to gender diversity, across the life science industry there is a persistent gap in male and female representation on Boards and in C-Suites (top-level jots)," Fetzer said. "This has been an area of focus and commitment from the Synthetic Genomics board and our entire leadership team."

Original Article: <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/biotech/sd-me-gender-venter-20170919-story.html>