

Travelers Say Motel Lied About Being Full

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BRANDON — Antoine and Charmada Meeks say they were denied a room at a Best Western in Bushnell because they are black.

The couple filed a complaint Wednesday with the civil rights division of the Florida attorney general's office.

Carolyn Hicks-Marion, a spokeswoman for Best Western International, said the Best Western in Bushnell has never had a complaint before and hires minorities, including blacks.

The Meekses said the Aug. 16 incident happened at the Best Western Guest House Inn at Interstate 75 and State Road 48 in Bushnell. They had driven from their suburban Atlanta home to attend their closing on a house in Brandon.

Antoine Meeks said a clerk turned him away, saying there were no rooms at the inn. As Meeks pulled out of the parking lot, he said he noticed there were only a few cars in the parking lot.

They drove to another Best Western along I-75 in Brooksville and rented a room without any problem, Antoine Meeks said. They asked the clerk to check on room availability at the Best Western in Bushnell and the clerk told them there were plenty of rooms there.

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Travelers help them prove point.

BLACK TRAVELERS

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he said.

The Meekses decided to check for themselves and drove back to Bushnell.

At a gas station across the street from the Best Western, they asked several white people for help. Some laughed or thought it was a hoax, Antoine Meeks said.

But two visitors from St. Paul, Minn., said they would help because they were staying at the motel.

Annie Cherveny and Thomas Barnes, both 23, went to the Best Western desk, where the night clerk told them they had plenty of rooms, they said.

"Then I went off on them," Cherveny said during a telephone interview. "I said then why don't you have any rooms for our black friends?"

"Then he said, 'Well, we've had some electrical problems.'"

Antoine Meeks snapped a photo of the clerk, and the man ordered him to leave.

The next day, another clerk told Cherveny and Barnes they could not rent the room for another night, saying there had been complaints about them from other guests.

Hicks-Marion said the clerk's version of what happened is different from the Meeks' version. She would not describe the differences.

"If there is going to be legal



Tribune photo by GARY RINGS

Antoine and Charmada Meeks say on Aug. 16 a Bushnell hotel clerk told them there were no rooms. But a couple who heard their story later were told there were plenty, they said.

action they don't want to try it in the papers," Hicks-Marion said of the Bushnell Best Western's owner.

Reading from a prepared statement, she said: "The hotel's management and staff does not discriminate based on a person's race or color. The hotel management hires and rents rooms to people of all races and ethnic backgrounds."

Allison Bethel, the head of the Florida attorney general's civil rights division, said they have not previously had complaints about the Bushnell Best Western.

Bethel said it is against state law for hotels to refuse rooms to people based on race. She said similar complaints have been hard to verify because they usually are "he said, she

said" situations. But because the Meekses solicited help from strangers, this case might be different, Bethel said.

Darryl Rouson, president of the St. Petersburg branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said that in the four years he has been involved with the NAACP here, there haven't been any complaints about hotels in the Tampa Bay area turning away people based on race.

"But incidents such as this remind us that we have a long way to go," Rouson said.

The Meekses moved to Brandon and have had no problems since Aug. 16, the couple said. Antoine Meeks works in the mortgage industry and Charmada Meeks is looking for a job in the com-

puter field.

They said the reason they didn't complain immediately after the incident was because they were in the middle of moving and didn't know whom to turn to in Tampa. They said they have not experienced such discrimination.

They have two daughters, ages 7 and 12, but have not told them about what happened because they don't want the girls to be afraid about their neighbors in Florida, the couple said.

The Meekses haven't filed a lawsuit, though they haven't ruled that out.

"We want to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone again," Antoine Meeks said.

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