IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

DIVISION OF ST. CROIX

MOHAMMED HAMED by his authorized agent WALEED HAMED
Plaintiff

Vs.

FATHI YUSUF and UNITED CORPORATION, ET AL
Defendant

CASE NO. SX-12-CV-370

ACTION FOR: DAMAGES; ET AL

NOTICE
OF
ENTRY OF JUDGMENT/ORDER

TO: JOEL HOLT, ESQ.; CARL HARTMANN III, Esquire
NIZAR DEWOOD, ESQ.; GREGORY HODGES, Esquire
MARK ECKARD, ESQ.; JEFFREY MOORHEAD, Esquire

HON. EDGAR ROSS (edgarrossjudge@hotmail.com)
JUDGES AND MAGISTRATES OF THE SUPERIOR COURT
LAW CLERKS; LAW LIBRARY; IT; RECORD BOOK

Please take notice that on APRIL 27, 2015 Memorandum Order was entered by this Court in the above-entitled matter.

Dated: April 27, 2015

ESTRELLA H. GEORGE (ACTING)
Clerk of the Superior Court

By: IRIS D. CINTRON
COURT CLERK II

IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DIVISION OF ST. CROIX

MOHAMMED HAMED by his authorized agent WALEED HAMED, Plaintiff/Counterclaim Defendant, v. FATHI YUSUF and UNITED CORPORATON, Defendants/Counterclaimants v. WALEED HAMED, WAHEED HAMED, MUFEED HAMED, HISHAM HAMED, and PLESSEN ENTERPRISES, INC. Counterclaim Defendants.	CIVIL NO. SX-12-CV-370 ACTION FOR DAMAGES, etc.

MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER

THIS MATTER is before the Court on Defendant United Corporation's Motion to Withdraw Rent and Memorandum of Law in Support of United's Motion ("Motion"), filed September 9, 2013; Plaintiff's Response, filed September 16, 2013; United's Reply, filed September 27, 2013; Plaintiff's Motion for Partial Summary Judgment re the Statute of Limitations Defense Barring Defendants' Counterclaim Damages Prior to September 16, 2006 (Plaintiff's "Summary Judgment Motion"), filed May 13, 2014; and Defendant's Brief in Opposition ("Opposition"), filed June 6, 2014. For the reasons that follow, United's Motion will be granted and Plaintiff's Summary Judgment Motion will be denied, in part.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In its instant Motion, United seeks allegedly past due rents for Bay No. 1 of United Shopping Plaza, defined therein as "69,680 Sq. Ft. Retail Space...," "utilized for the day to day operations of Plaza Extra East Store located at 4C and 4D Estate Sion Farm, St. Croix, Virgin Islands." Motion, 1-2.[1] Since 1986 this retail space has been leased by United to the Hamed-Yusuf Partnership ("Partnership"). According to United, and supported by the Affidavit of Defendant Yusuf, the Partnership has paid rent to United for leasing that space while operating Plaza Extra - East. Between 1986 and 1993, the parties settled rents following a request made by United. Motion, 3. Additionally, between 2004 and 2011, after United requested a rent payment for those years, the Partnership authorized payment to United for $5,408,806. Motion, 7 (Yusuf Affidavit, ¶7 and Exhibit B).

However, according to United, the Partnership owes United substantial unpaid rents from 1994-2004 and from January 1, 2012 - September 30, 2013. As a result of the injunction, entered in April 2013, Yusuf, a United shareholder, is unable to unilaterally withdraw money from the Partnership accounts for the purpose of paying rent or for any other reason. United requests the Court to allow United to withdraw rent in the amount of $3,999,679.73 (for 1994-2004) and $1,234,618.98 (for 2012-2013) for a total of $5,234,298.71 from the Partnership's account. Motion 1-2.

United argues that it was a common practice for the Partnership to make lump sum rent payments as opposed to monthly or even yearly payments. Motion, 3. United argues that it did not

[1] Defendant United's Counterclaim seeks back rent from Bays 1, 5 and 8 located in the same premises. However, for purposes of winding up the Partnership and because United's Motion only seeks back rent for Bay No. 1, this Order addresses only Bay No. 1.

seek rental payments for 1994-2004 because certain relevant financial records, informally referred to as the "black book," were seized by the FBI during the course of a criminal investigation. Motion, 7; Yusuf Affidavit, ¶8. As a result, United was unable to properly determine the amounts of past due Partnership rent and for that reason did not demand payments.

United explains in detail that the rent for Plaza Extra - East "is calculated based upon the 2012 sales of Plaza Extra -Tutu Park, St. Thomas store..." (Motion, 4). "The sales are divided by the square footage to arrive at a percentage amount. That percentage amount is multiplied by the sales of the Plaza Extra - East store located at 4C & 4D Estate Sion Farm, St. Croix." Motion, 5. According to United, this formula has been agreed upon by United and the Partnership and "...was used to calculate the rent for the period of May 5th, 2004 through December 31st, 2011... the monthly rate of $58,791.38 is what the current monthly rent is." Yusuf Affidavit, ¶8; Exhibit C (Rent Calculations Sheet).

Plaintiff, in his Response, argues that Yusuf cites no procedural basis that would allow United, in its capacity as landlord, to withdraw rents from the Partnership's accounts. Response, 1. Plaintiff further argues that United has issued rent notices for $250,000.00 per month as opposed to the $58,791.38 per month stated in Yusuf's affidavit for rent allegedly due from January, 2012. Response, 4. Without disputing that some rent is due, Plaintiff disputes United's calculations, pointing to discrepancies in the store's square footage[2] and implying that the rent for Plaza Extra - Tutu and Plaza Extra - East should be identical. Response, 4-5.

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[2] Plaintiff argues that the square footage of Bay No. 1 is 67,498 sq. ft. as opposed to United's claim of 69,280 sq. ft. Response, 4-5. United has consistently averred that Bay No. 1 is 69,680 sq. ft. The Court will accept the previously undisputed square footage of Bay No. 1 as 69,680 sq. ft. and will allow monetary adjustments based on deviations from this area measurement if more accurate assessments in the future reveal that this area measurement is inaccurate. This can be accomplished as part of the Liquidating Partner's and Master's responsibilities during the wind up process.

Plaintiff, in both his Response and Summary Judgment Motion, asserts a statute of limitations defense for the past rents (1994-2004). Plaintiff cites V.I. Code Ann Tit. 5, §31(3) which sets a six year statute of limitations for "...actions upon contract or liability, express or implied, excepting those mentioned in paragraph (1)(C) of this article." Response, 5-6; Plaintiff's Summary Judgment Motion, 2-3.

United responds to Plaintiff's statute of limitations argument by claiming that Yusuf and Plaintiff's authorized agent, Waleed Hamed, reached an oral agreement in early 2012 to have the Partnership pay the past due rent back to United. Opposition, 10-11. This oral agreement was allegedly breached by Plaintiff when his attorney sent United a letter dated May 22, 2013 claiming that no agreement on rent had ever been reached. Opposition, 11; Exhibit D. Yusuf, by his affidavit, asserts that an agreement was reached for past rent to be paid when the Partnership's "black book" was returned by the FBI and a proper calculation could be achieved. Yusuf Affidavit, ¶¶4-6. Only when Yusuf's son discovered that the FBI had returned the black book in early 2013, did United calculate the past rent and seek repayment from the Partnership.

Hamed has admitted that the Partnership owes United rent: "We pay rent...we owe Mr. Yusuf... I don't pay for half. Still we owe him some more." Exhibit E, Hamed Deposition, p. 86; 10-14. Through an interpreter, Hamed admitted that rent is controlled by Yusuf, that he does not object to paying rent and that Yusuf (on behalf of United) could charge rent and collect it. Exhibit E, Hamed deposition p. 119; 7-11. In fact, when Hamed was asked "...if rent was not paid from January 1, 1994 through May 4, 2004, would you agree that rent should be paid," Hamed responded, "It should be paid." Exhibit E, Hamed Deposition, p. 117; 21-25.

Yusuf claims that he alone had been in charge of calculating rent and had bound the Partnership to paying United rent. Opposition, 11; Exhibit B, Yusuf Deposition p. 86; 8-12. Yusuf specified that United would charge the Partnership rent at $5.55 per square foot, "the same as the old one." *Id.* Yusuf states that the rental terms, as discussed with Hamed, revived the previous arrangement which had begun in 1986 and extended the landlord-tenant relationship from January, 1994 through 2004, briefly discussing how rent is calculated for Plaza Extra - East based on the percentage of sales from the Plaza Extra - St. Thomas store. Yusuf Deposition p. 88; 4-9; p. 89; 19-22.

DISCUSSION

The Court will examine whether the Partnership owes United rents from 1994 to 2004 (past due rent) and from 2012 to 2013. This inquiry is limited to the issue of rents and does not extend to other relief sought by Defendants' Counterclaim or to other aspects of Plaintiff's Motion for Partial Summary Judgment beyond the issue of past due rents.

1. The Court has the authority to order the Partnership to repay past due rent.

Plaintiff argues that United has failed to cite a procedural justification for the Court to order the Partnership to pay past due rent to United. Response, 1.

Without a written partnership agreement, as is the case between Hamed and Yusuf, courts will look to the Uniform Partnership Act to determine a partnership's property and its obligations to creditors (codified at 26 V.I.C. § 24; § 177, respectively). "The reason is that dissolution does not terminate or discharge pre-existing contracts between the partnership and its clients, and ex-partners who perform under such contracts do so as fiduciaries for the benefit of the dissolved partnership." *Labrum & Doak v. Ashdale*, 227 B.R. 391, 409 (Bankr. E.D. Pa. 1998).

In connection with winding up the Partnership, the Court has made several discretionary decisions regarding asset allocation in accordance with the Uniform Partnership Act and for the benefit of the partners. *See* Final Wind Up Plan, entered January 9, 2015. As the parties move forward with the wind up process, it is necessary to determine what constitutes Partnership property. Most of this determination can and should be done without judicial intervention but, in the case of past rents, Hamed cannot agree with Partnership creditor United, or with Yusuf, a United shareholder and Hamed's equal partner in the Partnership, as to the amount of rent that the Partnership owes United.

The Virgin Islands Supreme Court, in denying Defendants' appeal of this Court's Wind Up Plan, stated that "...matters that fall within the administration of winding up the partnership, over which the Superior Court possesses considerable discretion... are not immediately appealable." *Yusuf v. Hamed*, 2015 V.I. Supreme LEXIS 6, at *5-6 (V.I. February 27, 2015)(*citing Belleair Hotel Co. v. Mabry*, 109 F.2d 390, 391 (5th Cir. 1940); *see also United States v. Antiques Ltd. P'Ship*, 760 F.3d 668, 671-72 (7th Cir. 2014)).

Appellate courts, when treating a lower court's supervision over a wind up process as similar to a receivership, "...have recognized 'the scores of discretionary administrative orders a [trial] court must make in supervising its receiver.'" Hamed, 2015 V.I. Supreme LEXIS 6, at *6 (*quoting S.E.C. v. Olins*, 541 Fed. Appx. 48, 51 (2d Cir. 2013) (*quoting IIT v. Vencap, Ltd.*, 519 F.2d 1001, 1020 (2d Cir. 1975)).

With the aim of winding up the Partnership in a fair and efficient manner, the Court in this Order exercises its "considerable discretion" to determine how much rent the Partnership owes to United as a debt due and owing under the Uniform Partnership Act.

2. The statute of limitations does not bar Defendant United's claim for rent and United is entitled to past due rent in the amount of $3,999,679.73 for 1994-2004.

Plaintiff argues that the Partnership is not responsible for rent from 1994-2004 because the six year statute of limitations for actions in debt expired in 2010, two years before the filing of his original Complaint in this action. Defendant United argues that the parties entered into an oral contract in 2012 that bound the Partnership to pay the past due rents as soon as a proper accounting could be done (i.e. the black book was recovered). When the black book was located in early 2013 and United made a subsequent demand for past rent, Plaintiff claimed that "there was never an understanding that rent would be paid for this time period..." and even if there had been, the statute of limitations had expired (preventing all claims for rents that came due prior to September, 2006). Motion, Exhibit D. According to Defendant United, the Partnership reneging on the agreement to pay back rents constituted a breach of contract which carries a six year statute of limitations that has yet to expire.

The Court views this matter somewhat differently. While 5 V.I.C. § 31(3) sets a six year statute of limitations for contractual liabilities such as payment of rents, there are certain equitable principles which operate to toll a statute of limitations. The "acknowledgment of the debt" doctrine (also known as the "revival of the promise to pay" doctrine) is recognized as follows:

> A debt which is time-barred may be "revived" by an acknowledgment by the debtor. 'It has long been recognized that the expiration of the statutory period does not bar the claim if the plaintiff can prove an acknowledgment, a new promise, or part payment made by the defendant either before or after the statute has run. . . . Such conduct revives the cause of action so that the statute starts to run again for the full statutory period.'

Gee v. CBS, Inc., 471 F. Supp. 600, 663 (E.D. Pa. 1979)(*quoting Developments in the Law Statutes of Limitations*, 63 Harvard L.Rev. 1177, 1254 (1950)).

Most courts only apply the acknowledgment of the debt doctrine when there exists "a clear, distinct, or unequivocal acknowledgment of the debt... [which] is sufficient to take the case out of the operation of the statute. It must be an admission consistent with a promise to pay. If so, the law will imply the promise, without its having been actually or expressly made. There must not be uncertainty as to the particular debt to which the admission applies." *CBS, Inc.* 471 Supp. at 664 (*citing In re Nicolazzo's Estate*, 414 Pa. 186, 190, 199 A.2d 455, 458 (1964), *quoting Palmer v. Gillespie*, 95 Pa. 340 (1880)).

Courts have employed a second equitable principle when tolling a statute of limitations, referred to as the "payment on account doctrine." Similar to the acknowledgment of the debt doctrine, the payment on account doctrine "... is regarded as an acknowledgment of liability." *Basciano v. L&R Auto Parks, Inc.,* 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 17750, *36-39 (E.D. Pa. February 10, 2012)(*citing Quaker City Chocolate & Confectionery Co. v. Delhi-Warnock Bldg. Ass'n,* 53 A.2d 597, 600 (Pa. 1947)("There can be no more clear and unequivocal acknowledgment of debt than actual payment.")). To toll the statute of limitations, a partial payment "must constitute a constructive acknowledgment of the debt from which a promise to pay the balance may be inferred." *GE Med. Sys. v. Silverman,* 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 886, * 20-21 (E.D. Pa. Feb. 2, 1998)(*quoting City of Philadelphia v. Holmes Electric Protective Co.*, 335 Pa. 273, 6 A.2d 884, 888 (Pa. 1939)). *See also Quaker City Chocolate & Confectionery Co.,* 53 A.2d at 600 ("Ordinarily, a payment on account of a debt is regarded as an acknowledgment of liability

and of willingness to pay the balance due thereon and therefore is held to interrupt the operation of the statute").[3]

In this case, both the acknowledgment of the debt doctrine and the payment on account doctrine apply to toll the statute of limitations on United's rent claims.

Regarding the acknowledgment of the debt, United has proven with sufficient certainty that the Partnership owes United rent from 1994 to 2004. Notwithstanding Plaintiff's denial that the parties had an agreement regarding past rents, Yusuf, by his affidavit, swears that Waleed Hamed entered into an agreement to pay United past due rent once the black book was recovered in early 2013. Opposition, 10-11; Exhibit D, Yusuf Affidavit, ¶¶4-6. Yusuf specifically addresses how rent is calculated ($5.55 per square foot), stating that the past due rent is "the same as the old one," referring to the 1986-1994 rental amounts. Yusuf Deposition p. 86; 8-12. Yusuf presents more than sufficient evidence that the Partnership's arrangement with United from 1986 to 1994 was identical, in terms of past due rent, as the arrangement between 1994 through 2004.

Nothing presented by Hamed calls into questions the validity of this debt or the application of the acknowledgment of the debt doctrine. Hamed has admitted on several occasions that Yusuf is in charge of rent, that the Partnership owes United rent for January 1, 1994 through May 4, 2004, and that the rent for this period should be paid to United. Opposition, Exhibit E, Hamed Deposition, p. 117-119. It is clear that the Partnership, through the statements of both Hamed and Yusuf, has

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[3] Courts will only allow "...a payment on a debt to qualify as an acknowledgment..." if there is an "unequivocal acknowledgment" of the debt, but have considered a debtor's payment on part of a debt to evidence an acknowledgment of the debt and therefore have tolled the statute of limitations. *See Basciano,* 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 17750, at *36. From the acknowledgment of the debt the law will infer a promise to pay the underlying debt. *Receiver of Anthracite Trust Co. v. Loughran,* 19 A.2d 61, 62 (Pa. 1941) (*citing Dick v. Daylight Garage,* 335 Pa. 224, 6 A.2d 823, 826 (Pa. 1939)).

acknowledged a debt for rents owed to United, which is determined to be in the amount of $3,999,679.73 (based upon 69,680 sq. ft. @ $5.55/sq. ft.) for the period January 1, 1994 to May 4, 2004.

Similarly, the payment on account doctrine acts as a bar to Plaintiff's statute of limitations defense. The Partnership's partial payments "...constitute a constructive acknowledgment of the debt from which a promise to pay the balance may be inferred." *GE Med. Sys.*, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 886, at *20-21. For the period of the operation of Plaza Extra – East from 1986 through 2011, the Partnership made two lump sum rent payments to United (covering the periods from 1986-1994 and from 2004-2011). Motion, Yusuf Affidavit, ¶7; Exhibit B (previous rental check for $5.4 million). United and Yusuf have explained in detail how rent is calculated and why United did not collect rent for the period in question due to the unavailability of their financial records. Motion, 4, 7; Yusuf Affidavit, ¶8.

Therefore, both the acknowledgment of the debt doctrine and the payment on account doctrine apply to the facts of the rent dispute between United and the Partnership. The six year statute of limitations for United's past rent claims was tolled as a result and began to run on May 22, 2013 when Hamed first disputed the validity of the 1994-2004 rent debt. Motion, Exhibit D. United is within the timeframe with which to bring this claim and has presented sufficient information, through affidavits, depositions, and other evidence in the record, for the Court to grant United's Motion as to that period and to direct the Partnership to pay United the sum of $3,999,679.73.

3. Defendant United is also entitled to rent from 2012 to 2013 in the amount of $58,791.38 per month.

Plaintiff does not argue that the Partnership is exempt from paying rent to United. "[I]t is undisputed that United is the landlord and Plaza Extra is the tenant at the Sion Farm location, for which rent is due since January of 2012." Response, 1. Rather, Plaintiff claims that United itself has created a dispute regarding rents from January 2012 by issuing rent notices seeking increased rent in the amount of $250,000.00 per month, rather than the $58,791.38 per month set out in Yusuf's affidavit. Response, 4. The proof before the Court is clear as to United's claim that rent is due for Bay No. 1 at the rate of $58,791.38 per month from January 1, 2012 to September 30, 2013, when United's Motion was filed.[4]

As the fee simple owner and landlord of Bay No. 1 United Shopping Plaza, United is entitled to rents from the Partnership for its continued use of Bay No. 1 for the operations of Plaza Extra - East. Therefore, the Court will order the Partnership to pay United the sum of $1,234,618.98 for rent from January 1, 2012 through September 30, 2013, Plus rent due from October 1, 2013 at the same rate of $58,791.38 per month until the date that Yusuf assumed sole possession and control of Plaza extra – East.

On the basis of the foregoing, it is hereby

ORDERED that Defendant United Corporation's Motion to Withdraw Rent is GRANTED, and the Liquidating Partner, under the supervision of the Master, is authorized and directed to pay

[4] It is acknowledged that United delivered notices to the Partnership following the April 2013 Preliminary Injunction, seeking to collect an increased rent sum of $250,000.00. United presents in its Motion and proofs no numerical or factual justification for such claims, which are not considered in this Order.

from the Partnership joint account for past rents due to United the total amount of $5,234,298.71, plus additional rents that have come due from October 1, 2013 at the rate of $58,791.38 per month, until the date that Yusuf assumed full possession and control of Plaza Extra – East. It is further

ORDERED that Plaintiff's Motion for Partial Summary Judgment is DENIED, in part, as to Plaintiff's claims that the statute of limitations precludes Defendant United's claims for past due rent.

Dated: April 27, 2015

DOUGLAS A. BRADY
Judge of the Superior Court

ATTEST:
ESTRELLA GEORGE
Acting Clerk of the Court

By: _____
Court Clerk Supervisor
4/27/15

CERTIFIED TO BE A TRUE COPY
This 27th day of April 2015

CLERK OF THE COURT
By _____ Court Clerk II