

SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

William McKitrick and Amy McKitrick v. Chrysler Group, LLC

No. 13-0119 (Jefferson County 12-C-104) (W. Va. Nov. 8, 2013) · No. No. 13-0119 · Decided November 8, 2013

SUMMARY

The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed summary judgment for Chrysler Group, LLC, in a vehicle warranty action arising from the destruction of the plaintiffs' Jeep Liberty by fire. The court held that, without expert testimony or other evidence identifying the cause of the fire, the plaintiffs' circumstantial evidence would leave a jury to guess at the alleged warranty breach. The court distinguished a prior case involving a vehicle with documented electrical problems and repair attempts preceding the fire.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Chief Justice Brent D. Benjamin; Justice Menis E. Ketchum; Justice Allen H. Loughry II; Justice Robin Jean Davis; Justice Margaret L. Workman
JURISDICTION	West Virginia
DECIDED	November 8, 2013
DOCKET	No. 13-0119
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petitioners appealed a circuit court order granting Chrysler summary judgment in an action asserting breach of vehicle warranty and related statutory and Uniform Commercial Code claims.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review applies to a circuit court order granting summary judgment.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	memorandum decision; limited or nonprecedential under the court's Rule 21 procedure
PARTIES	William McKitrick, Amy McKitrick v. Chrysler Group, LLC

TOPICS

[summary judgment](#)[breach of contract](#)[warranty](#)[consumer protection](#)[standard of review](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

contracts

consumer protection

uniform commercial code

evidence

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the circuit court properly granted summary judgment where the plaintiffs relied on circumstantial evidence to prove that a defect covered by the vehicle's express or implied warranty caused the fire.
2. Whether the circumstantial evidence was sufficient to establish a breach of warranty without leaving the jury to speculate about the cause of the alleged breach.

HOLDINGS

1. Summary judgment for Chrysler was proper because the McKitricks presented no direct evidence, expert testimony, or other evidence identifying a warrantable defect or the cause of the fire, and their circumstantial evidence would require a jury to guess at the cause of the alleged breach.
2. A circuit court's order granting summary judgment is reviewed de novo.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A breach of warranty may be proved by circumstantial evidence as well as direct evidence but the jury must not be left to guess the cause of the alleged breach.” (at 2)

“A plaintiff, who seeks to recover damages for breach of an [express or an] implied warranty for fitness of purpose, is not required to exclude every possible cause for the defective condition of the goods purchased and may establish the defective nature of the goods by circumstantial evidence.” (at 2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The McKitricks purchased a new 2010 Chrysler Jeep Liberty on May 8, 2010. On February 19, 2012, while Amy McKitrick was driving, the engine began to rev, the vehicle decelerated, smoke appeared, and the vehicle caught fire and was destroyed. The cause of the fire was never determined; the vehicle had operated for approximately twenty-one months and 37,000 miles without problems, and William McKitrick had performed maintenance and installed a Bluetooth device requiring electrical wiring. The McKitricks had no expert testimony or other evidence identifying a defect or cause of the fire.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The McKitricks purchased a new 2010 Chrysler Jeep Liberty, which was destroyed by fire approximately twenty-one months and 37,000 miles later. After Chrysler denied their warranty claim, they filed suit. The Circuit Court of Jefferson County granted Chrysler's Rule 56 motion for summary judgment on January 8, 2013, and the McKitricks appealed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Painter v. Peavy, 192 W. Va. 189, 451 S.E.2d 755 (1994)
- Payne v. Valley Motor Sales, Inc., 146 W. Va. 1063, 124 S.E.2d 622 (1962)
- Dawson v. Canteen Corp., 158 W. Va. 516, 212 S.E.2d 82 (1975)
- Anderson v. Chrysler Corp., 184 W. Va. 641, 403 S.E.2d 189 (1991)
- Jones, Inc. v. W.A. Wiedebusch Plumbing & Heating Co., 157 W. Va. 257, 201 S.E.2d 248 (1973)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS William McKittrick and Amy McKittrick, FILED Plaintiffs Below, Petitioners November 8, 2013 RORY L. PERRY II, CLERK SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS vs) No. 13-0119 (Jefferson County 12-C-104) OF WEST VIRGINIA Chrysler Group, LLC, Defendant Below, Respondent MEMORANDUM DECISION Petitioners William and Amy McKittrick, by counsel Stephen G. Skinner, appeal the summary judgment order entered by the Circuit Court of Jefferson County on January 8, 2013.

Petitioners argue that they presented sufficient circumstantial evidence to survive summary judgment in their lawsuit asserting breach of a vehicle's warranty. Respondent Chrysler Group, LLC., by counsel James M. Popson, Christina J. Marshall, and John R. Conley, responds in support of the order. This Court has considered the parties' briefs and the record on appeal.

The facts and legal arguments are adequately presented, and the decisional process would not be significantly aided by oral argument. Upon consideration of the standard of review, the briefs, and the record presented, the Court finds no substantial question of law and no prejudicial error.

For these reasons, a memorandum decision affirming is appropriate under Rule 21 of the Rules of Appellate Procedure. The McKittricks purchased a new 2010 Chrysler Jeep Liberty on May 8, 2010. Mrs. McKittrick asserts that on February 19, 2012, she was driving on an interstate highway when the Jeep's engine began to "rev," the vehicle decelerated on its own, and she observed smoke billowing from under the hood.

She pulled to the side of the road, turned the vehicle off, and got out. Mrs. McKittrick reports that she saw dripping fluid and flames underneath the center of the vehicle. She fled on foot as the vehicle became engulfed by fire.

The McKittricks report that the Jeep was totally destroyed. The cause of the fire has not been determined. Prior to February 19, 2012, the McKittricks had experienced no problems with this vehicle. The Jeep was covered by a manufacturer's bumper-to-bumper warranty for thirty-six months or 36,000 miles, and an extended power train warranty for five years or 100,000 miles.

After the fire the McKitricks made a claim under the warranty, which Chrysler denied. They then filed the instant lawsuit against Chrysler asserting claims for violation of the West Virginia Consumer Protection—New Motor Vehicle Warranties Act, West Virginia Code §§ 46A-6A-1—9; the federal Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act, 15 United States Code §§ 2301—2312; and the 1 Uniform Commercial Code.¹ Pursuant to Rule 56 of the West Virginia Rules of Civil Procedure, Chrysler filed a motion for summary judgment arguing that the McKitricks could not meet their burden of proving that a defect covered by the vehicle’s warranty had caused the fire.

The circuit court agreed and granted the motion by order entered on January 8, 2013, from which the McKitricks now appeal. We consider a circuit court’s order granting summary judgment under a de novo standard of review. Syl. Pt. 1, *Painter v. Peavy*, 192 W.Va. 189, 451 S.E.2d 755 (1994). With regard to the evidence needed to prove a breach of warranty case, we have held that “[a] breach of warranty may be proved by circumstantial evidence as well as direct evidence but the jury must not be left to guess the cause of the alleged breach.” Syl.

Pt. 2, *Payne v. Valley Motor Sales, Inc.*, 146 W.Va. 1063, 124 S.E.2d 622 (1962), superceded by statute on other grounds as stated in *Dawson v. Canteen Corp.*, 158 W.Va. 516, 517 n.2, 212 S.E.2d 82, 83 n.2 (1975); *Anderson v. Chrysler Corp.*, 184 W.Va. 641, 646, 403 S.E.2d 189, 194 (1991). Furthermore, “A plaintiff, who seeks to recover damages for breach of an [express or an] implied warranty for fitness of purpose, is not required to exclude every possible cause for the defective condition of the goods purchased and may establish the defective nature of the goods by circumstantial evidence.” Syllabus Point 5, as modified, *Jones, Inc. v. W.A.*

Wiedebusch Plumbing & Heating Co., 157 W.Va. 257, 201 S.E.2d 248 (1973). Syl. Pt. 4, *Anderson*. The McKitricks argue that there is sufficient circumstantial evidence of a breach of warranty and summary judgment was granted in error. They argue that their Jeep was used and driven under normal circumstances—just the regular driving of a family car—and that its maintenance and condition were such that there were no reasonable causes for the fire other than a manufacturer’s defect.

Although Mr. McKitrick performed some maintenance and other work on the Jeep, they assert that he is very knowledgeable and experienced in car repairs. They argue that the fire is, in and of itself, evidence of breach of warranty.

After a careful review of the record and the parties’ briefs, we must reject the McKitricks’ arguments and affirm the circuit court’s summary judgment order. It is undisputed that there is no direct evidence that the Jeep was not in conformance with express or implied warranties.

The McKitricks do not have expert testimony or other evidence as to what caused the fire. Evidence in the record indicates that the Jeep was driven for twenty-one months and approximately 37,000 miles without any problems or repairs. Mr. McKitrick had personally

performed maintenance on the vehicle including oil and oil filter changes, and he installed a 1 The McKitricks' Amended Complaint does not specify which sections of the Uniform Commercial Code they are relying upon.

We assume they mean the express warranties provisions of West Virginia Code § 46-2-313, and/or the implied warranties provisions of West Virginia Code §§ 46-2-314 and -315. 2 Bluetooth device that required connecting electrical wires inside the dashboard. Chrysler points out that several items of maintenance and routine inspections required by the vehicle's owner's manual were not performed.

Accordingly, even weighing the circumstantial evidence in a light most favorable to the McKitricks, it is clear to us that the jury would be left to guess at the cause of the alleged breach of warranty. Under such circumstances, Chrysler is entitled to summary judgment.

The case sub judice is easily contrasted with our decision in *Anderson*, where we concluded that there was sufficient circumstantial evidence for a plaintiff to survive a motion for judgment as a matter of law. *Id.*, 184 W.Va. at 646-47, 403 S.E.2d at 194-95.

In *Anderson*, the owners of a new vehicle experienced electrical problems while driving it home from the showroom. *Id.*, 184 W.Va. at 643, 403 S.E.2d at 191. Multiple repair attempts were made, and the day after the dealership attempted yet another repair, the vehicle caught on fire. *Id.* Although the plaintiffs in *Anderson* did not have direct evidence of the cause of the fire, the history and timing of the problems and repairs presented sufficient circumstantial evidence to go before a jury.

Id., 184 W.Va. at 647, 403 S.E.2d at 195. The McKitricks lack such circumstantial evidence. Moreover, they do not assert a need for additional discovery. To the contrary, the McKitricks filed a cross-motion for summary judgment on liability.

For the foregoing reasons, we affirm. Affirmed. ISSUED: November 8, 2013 CONCURRED IN BY: Chief Justice Brent D. Benjamin Justice Menis E. Ketchum Justice Allen H. Loughry II DISSENTING: Justice Robin Jean Davis Justice Margaret L. Workman 3