

CITATION: ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp. v. Trigger Wholesale Inc., 2021 ONSC 3421
COURT FILE NO.: CV-20-00649154-00CL
DATE: 20210526

ONTARIO

SUPERIOR COURT OF JUSTICE

BETWEEN:

CLEARFLOW COMMERCIAL FINANCE
CORP.

Applicant/Moving Party

– and –

TRIGGER WHOLESALE INC., THE EN
CADRE GROUP INC., MARK GDAK,
JAIMEE LYNN GDAK and JAIMAK
REAL PROPERTIES INC.

Respondents/Responding Parties

Jeffrey J. Simpson, for the Applicant/Moving Party

Domenico Magisano and Jason Squire, for the Respondents/Responding Parties Trigger Wholesale Inc., The En Cadre Group Inc., Jaimak Real Properties Inc., and Mark Gdak

Benjamin G. Blay, for the
Respondent/Responding Party Jaimee Lynn
Gdak

*Roger Jaipargas and Douglas Smith, for
Grant Thornton Limited, the Receiver*

Ed D'Agostino, for J.B. Construction Inc.

HEARD: March 18 and April 15, 2021

REASONS FOR JUDGMENT

DIETRICH J.

[1] The applicant ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp. brings this motion to enforce guarantees executed by the respondents Mark Gdak and Jaimee Lynn Gdak in its favour.

[2] The applicant seeks a finding of liability against each of Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak in respect of separate, unlimited, continuing personal guarantees that each executed on April 30, 2015 in respect of the full amount of indebtedness of the respondent Trigger Wholesale, Inc. (“Trigger”) to the applicant (the “Guarantees”).

[3] Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak are shareholders, directors and officers of Trigger. This Court appointed Grant Thornton Limited, as an interim receiver over the assets and undertakings of Trigger on October 13, 2020, and as a full national receiver on October 22, 2020 (the “Receivership Order”).

[4] Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak are also shareholders, directors and officers of the respondent The En Cadre Group Inc. (“En Cadre”). It is an affiliate of Trigger, and also executed a guarantee of Trigger’s indebtedness on April 30, 2015 in favour of the applicant. The assets and undertakings of En Cadre are also subject to the Receivership Order.

[5] Mr. Gdak does not deny liability pursuant to his Guarantee. He has not filed any responding materials on this motion with respect to his Guarantee.

[6] Ms. Gdak denies liability on her Guarantee on the basis that there was an undisclosed material change in the principal amount of the indebtedness covered by the Guarantee, and because she did not have the opportunity to obtain independent legal advice. Alternatively, she asserts that the applicant, through its words and conduct, released her from her Guarantee.

[7] For the reasons that follow, I find that each of Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak is liable on his or her respective Guarantee in favour of the applicant, and the applicant is entitled to judgment with respect to that liability. The precise amount owing on the Guarantees remains to be determined.

Background Facts

[8] The applicant, a company incorporated pursuant to the laws of Canada, is in the business of providing financing to Ontario businesses, generally through the factoring of accounts receivable, and also by extending other types of credit facilities.

[9] Trigger is a company incorporated pursuant to the laws of Ontario, with an office in Waterloo, Ontario. Prior to the receivership, it was in the business of importing and distributing firearms and ammunition throughout Canada.

[10] The applicant made loans to Trigger pursuant to three separate credit facilities: factoring of accounts; purchase order financing; and discrete advances for business purposes. The applicant holds security against all the personal property and assets for Trigger and En Cadre in the form of a General Security Agreement in respect of each company.

[11] Martin Nicholas Rees, a partner at the applicant, took the lead with respect to the financing arrangements between the applicant and the respondents in 2015. Following its due diligence, the applicant made a financing offer, which involved a Master Purchase and Sale Agreement (the

“MPSA”), a Master Purchase Order Financing Agreement, and a Royalty Agreement, each dated April 30, 2015 (the “Credit Agreements”). The Credit Agreements set out the details of the financing arrangements as between the parties. Trigger accepted the offer.

[12] As part of the loan and security documentation executed by Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak, on behalf of Trigger, each of them executed a Guarantee of the full amount of the indebtedness of Trigger arising out of the Credit Agreements. Each of them, as officers of En Cadre, also signed a similar guarantee on behalf of En Cadre.

[13] Neither Mr. Gdak nor Ms. Gdak denies signing their respective Guarantees. Neither alleges that the Guarantee was signed under duress. Each Guarantee was witnessed by Brian Kelly, a lawyer who represented Trigger.

[14] At the time each Guarantee was signed, the total maximum principal indebtedness shown on the Credit Agreements was \$1.4 million (though the applicant’s funding proposal letter dated April 23, 2015 mistakenly states the total to be \$1.3 million).

[15] The applicant suffered losses through alleged schemes in which Trigger fabricated customer invoices and presented them to the applicant for purchase, and in which En Cadre forged documentation respecting a real property transfer.

[16] Pursuant to the terms of the MPSA, Trigger was obligated to provide to the applicant, monthly, a list of all outstanding invoices issued by it to its customers. The applicant could then choose to purchase some or all the accounts receivable and pay to Trigger 85 percent of the amount due and owing on the selected accounts receivable.

[17] When purchasing accounts receivable for factoring, the applicant would normally collect the receivables from the borrower’s customers directly. Customers would typically be required to remit payment within 30 to 60 days from the invoice date. Until the applicant received payment on its purchase orders, any funds advanced to the borrower would be considered loans from the applicant.

[18] In the case of Trigger, however, Mr. Gdak asked the applicant to deviate from its usual procedure. He told the applicant that because the regulations imposed by the RCMP and other federal agencies stipulated that only he, as a licensee permitted to sell firearms, could handle payments from purchasers for those firearms, he would need to collect the receivables. This was untrue.

[19] When the applicant purchased customer invoices from Trigger, it deposited the proceeds into an account held by Trigger. It is alleged that Trigger then drew cheques on that account payable to itself, which it then deposited into a “blocked account” at the Bank of Montreal (“BMO”). It then represented to the applicant that these funds were payments from customers, which the applicant and the Receiver believe to be fake customers. The applicant then swept the blocked account and applied the funds collected against the outstanding invoices it had purchased.

[20] Based on the results of the applicant's field audit of Trigger, and the Receiver's reporting, it appears that most of the invoices presented by Trigger to the applicant for factoring were falsified. Trigger provided the applicant with multiple purchase orders as evidence that Trigger was doing business with large retailers, such as Canadian Tire and Home Hardware Stores Limited, when, in fact, it was either doing no, or considerably less, business than the falsified purchase orders would suggest.

[21] It also appears that Mr. Gdak provided a forged real property transfer to the applicant designed to make it appear that En Cadre owned real property in the City of Waterloo, with an alleged value of \$48 million, and that En Cadre was selling this property. In fact, En Cadre had no interest in such property.

[22] In the spring of 2019, before the applicant became aware of the alleged fraudulent activities, Mr. Gdak approached the applicant to restructure the then-existing credit facilities that would soon expire. Mike Nero, an employee of Trigger, and Mr. Gdak negotiated on behalf of Trigger. Mr. Rees led the negotiations on behalf of the applicant. As part of those negotiations, which took place over the course of thirteen months, Trigger sought to renegotiate the Credit Agreements and to have Ms. Gdak released from her Guarantee.

[23] In an April 9, 2019 email to Mr. Nero, Mr. Rees confirmed that the partners at the applicant would need to agree to any amendments to the applicant's offer letter respecting the credit restructuring. He also reminded Mr. Nero of the April 15, 2019 deadline for providing financial information to the applicant and the need for the applicant to assess the financial standing of Trigger.

[24] The preliminary negotiations resulted in the applicant issuing a proposal dated May 2, 2019 (the "Proposal"), which, among other things, contemplated the renewal of the MPSA and a release of Ms. Gdak from her Guarantee.

[25] As a condition of the restructuring, over the course of the negotiations, the applicant continued to seek financial statements for the 2019 fiscal year, in a specified form. As the negotiations wore on, the applicant requested current financial statements for the fiscal 2020 year as well.

[26] Mr. Rees sent documentation prepared in support of the proposed restructuring to Mr. Gdak on May 16, 2019, by email. The documentation included an "Acknowledgement re Existing Security" (the "Acknowledgement"), which included a reference to a personal guarantee from Mr. Gdak and a guarantee from En Cadre. No reference was made to a personal guarantee from Ms. Gdak.

[27] On June 27, 2019, Mr. Rees sent another email to Mr. Gdak seeking a report on the timeframe for Trigger to provide Review Engagement Financial Statements, and he reminded Mr. Gdak and Mr. Nero that this was "a requirement."

[28] On July 3, 2019, Mr. Gdak signed the documents, and Mr. Nero returned them to the applicant via email. In an email exchange on the same day, in response to a request by Mr. Nero for a release letter discharging Ms. Gdak from her obligations, Mr. Rees agreed to provide a “letter of confirmation that the Guarantee of Jamie (*sic*) has been cancelled.” In the same email, Mr. Rees stated: “We do need the Financial Statements to implement the documents-it’s a condition.”

[29] Mr. Rees never prepared a document confirming that Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee had been cancelled or released.

[30] Approximately one year later, in June 2020, negotiations were still ongoing between the parties. No documents had been executed by the applicant, and it was still waiting to receive financial statements for the 2019 fiscal year and, by this point, the 2020 fiscal period as well. Because the applicant had not received financial statements from Trigger on a timely basis, it imposed additional conditions precedent to the credit restructuring, including a satisfactory field audit.

[31] Mr. Gdak confirmed in an email to Mr. Rees dated June 11, 2020 that three conditions precedent to the restructuring, which the applicant had imposed, remained outstanding.

[32] On June 25, 2020, Mr. Gdak provided inaccurate financial statements for the 2019 fiscal year. On the following day, he provided internally generated monthly statements for the 2020 fiscal year, which were also inaccurate.

[33] By September 2020, Mr. Adler had, in the course of his field audit, discovered the existence of the alleged fraudulent activity involving falsified invoices, a forged transfer of real property, phony email addresses, falsified firearms storage inspection certificates, impersonations of Canadian Tire and Home Hardware Stores Limited executives and phony cheques.

[34] The applicant did not accept the late-delivered financial statements and, in any event, Trigger had not met the satisfactory field audit condition. The documents drafted in support of the restructuring of the credit facilities were never approved by the applicant’s credit committee or board and were never signed back to Trigger.

[35] As of October 6, 2020, according to the applicant’s records, Trigger was indebted to it in the amount of \$48,543,931.75. Purchased accounts receivable and purchase orders accounted for \$42,943,931.75 of that amount, and separate advances made by the applicant accounted for \$5,600,000.

[36] The applicant cannot recover on the accounts receivable or the purchase orders because they appear to be forged documents. It cannot collect on the advances because it appears the advances were made based on forged real estate documentation.

[37] Following its discovery of these alleged fraudulent activities, the applicant issued a written demand for payment and Notices of Intention to Enforce Security to Mr. Gdak, Ms. Gdak, Trigger and En Cadre.

[38] Mr. Gdak has not denied his involvement in the alleged fraudulent activities. Ms. Gdak has denied any involvement in those activities. The parties agreed that this motion would be limited to the enforcement of the Guarantees and would not address allegations of fraud as against Ms. Gdak.

Positions of the Parties

[39] The applicant submits that the Guarantee signed by Ms. Gdak is a valid document, signed by her without duress, and witnessed by a lawyer, who was counsel to Trigger at the time the Credit Agreements and other financing arrangements were entered into. The applicant asserts that, given Ms. Gdak's direct involvement in Trigger as a director and officer, she had knowledge of Trigger's operations and obligations to the applicant, and she did not require independent legal advice with respect to the Guarantee.

[40] The applicant further submits that notwithstanding that there were discussions between representatives of Trigger and representatives of the applicant regarding Ms. Gdak's Guarantee, there was, in fact, no waiver of Ms. Gdak's Guarantee. The applicant asserts that it was consistent and clear that no restructuring of the credit facilities, including a waiver of Ms. Gdak's Guarantee, would be agreed to or implemented until certain conditions precedent were satisfied, including the delivery of financial statements by Trigger. Those conditions were never fulfilled, and Ms. Gdak was therefore never released from her Guarantee.

[41] Ms. Gdak submits that the Guarantee is not binding on her because there was an undisclosed material change to the principal indebtedness over the five years that followed her execution of the Guarantee. She asserts that her liability should be set aside based on unconscionability, or at least limited to \$1.4 million. She further asserts that she was not given an opportunity to obtain independent legal advice respecting the Guarantee.

[42] Ms. Gdak further submits that, in any event, the Guarantee is not binding on her because the applicant released her from the Guarantee through its words and conduct during the credit restructuring process.

[43] Mr. Gdak takes no position on the applicant's motion with respect to his liability under his Guarantee. The applicant submits that, because Mr. Gdak has not responded to this motion with respect to his Guarantee, judgment in respect of his liability should issue on an unopposed basis.

The Guarantee

[44] The relevant paragraphs of the Guarantee, shown in part, are as follows:

2. OBLIGATIONS GUARANTEED

In consideration of ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp. ... dealing with or continuing to deal with the Customer, you guarantee payment to us on demand, of all present and future lease payments and obligations, conditional sale instalments and obligations, and any other debts and liabilities (collectively, the "Obligations"),

both direct and indirect, (whether incurred alone or jointly with others, whether absolute or contingent, whether matured or not matured, and whether for principal, interest or fees) payable to us by the Customer under any and all lease agreements, conditional sale contracts, credit facilities, overdrafts, guarantees, letters of credit, indemnities together with all costs and expenses, including fees and expenses, incurred by us in connection with its dealings with the Customer. ...

3. NATURE OF YOUR LIABILITY

Your liability under this Guarantee is CONTINUING, absolute and unconditional. It will not be limited, reduced, or otherwise affected by any one or more of the following events:

...

- any change in the terms or amount or existence of the Obligations

...

17. GENERAL

... No alteration or waiver of this Guarantee or any of its terms or conditions shall be binding on us unless expressly made in writing by us. ... [emphasis added]

Issues

[45] The issues on this motion are as follows:

- (1) Is Ms. Gdak released from liability under her Guarantee?
- (2) If Ms. Gdak is not released from liability on her Guarantee based on a material change in the contractual arrangement, did the applicant release Ms. Gdak from such liability through its words and conduct during the restructuring of Trigger's credit facilities?
- (3) Is Mr. Gdak liable pursuant to his Guarantee?

Is Ms. Gdak released from liability under her Guarantee because of a material change to the contractual arrangements?

[46] Ms. Gdak asserts that when she signed her Guarantee the applicant had agreed to provide funding to Trigger up to \$1.4 million. The \$1.4 million was comprised of three credit facilities described in the applicant's April 23, 2015 funding proposal letter as follows:

- a) \$320,000 maximum to fund the cost of importation of firearms, accessories and ammunition to Canada for resale;
- b) \$900,000 in respect of all eligible accounts receivable, for 24 months, automatically renewable; and
- c) \$180,000 demand loan.

The funding proposal letter specifically refers to the “Corporate Guarantee of En Cadre and the Personal Unlimited Guarantee of Mark and Jamiee (sic) Gdak.”

[47] Ms. Gdak submits that she cannot be liable for anything in excess of \$1.4 million. She says that five years after the Guarantee was executed, the applicant claims the amount owing by her is now \$48,625,279.75 (as of October 6, 2020). Ms Gdak asserts that she had no part in any discussions relating to the restructuring of the credit facilities at any time. Therefore, she asserts that her liability must be capped at \$1.4 million.

[48] Further, Ms. Gdak asserts that she had no opportunity to obtain independent legal advice. She asserts that if she had had the opportunity to obtain independent legal advice, the unconscionable exponential increase in the indebtedness, which arose as a consequence of the inequality of bargaining power between her and the applicant, could have been discovered by counsel and her improvident bargain could have been prevented.

[49] For the reasons that follow, I disagree that Ms. Gdak’s liability is limited to the \$1.4 million referred to in the funding proposal letter of April 23, 2015. I also find that Ms. Gdak has not met her burden to show unconscionability, and I do not agree that she was denied an opportunity to obtain independent legal advice.

Material change

[50] It is not disputed that a guarantor will be released from liability where the creditor and the principal debtor agree to a material change in the terms of the contract of debt without the guarantor’s consent: *Manulife Bank of Canada v. Conlin*, [1996] 3 S.C.R. 415 at para. 2.

[51] However, it is also not disputed that it is open to parties to contract out of this protection, provided that any contracting out is clear: *Conlin* at para. 4, citing *First City Capital Ltd. v. Hall* (1993), 11 O.R. (3d) 792 (C.A.).

[52] In my view, the parties contracted out of this protection. The language of the Guarantee is unequivocal. It clearly states that Ms. Gdak’s liability would be continuing and unaffected by any change in the amount of the “Obligations.” In respect of her obligations, paragraph 2 reads: “you guarantee payment to us on demand, of all present and future lease payments and obligations, conditional sale instalments and obligations, and any other debts and liabilities (collectively, the “Obligations”).” [emphasis added]

[53] The extent of Ms. Gdak's liability is plainly stated in paragraph 3 of the Guarantee. There it states, in block capitals, that her liability is "CONTINUING" and that it will not be limited, reduced, or otherwise affected by "any change in the terms or amount or existence of the Obligations." [emphasis added] Ms. Gdak agreed to these terms.

Breach of Contract

[54] Ms. Gdak further asserts that a guarantor can be discharged if the creditor breaches the contract of guarantee: *Pax Management Ltd. v. Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce*, [1992] 2 S.C.R. 998. She asserts that the applicant has done just that by making advances far in excess of the maximum amounts set out in the documents underlying the credit facilities. Ms. Gdak submits that these advances resulted in a materially different risk being imposed on her.

[55] The applicant submits that over the six-year period during which the applicant provided financing to Trigger, the terms and conditions of the credit facilities did not change in any material way that would impact on Ms. Gdak's risk. For example, none of the security for the debt was released and none of the other guarantors was released.

[56] The alteration to the exact wording of the financing terms was an increase in the total amount lent such that by 2020 the total loan exceeded the amounts shown in the financing agreements.

[57] I do not agree that the applicant breached the terms of the Guarantee by making the additional advances. The language of the Guarantee clearly contemplates the possibility of additional advances by referring explicitly to "any change in the amount ... of the Obligations", and to the guarantor's obligation to pay on demand "present and future" obligations under the Guarantee. The risk of an increase in the amount of Ms. Gdak's obligation was a risk that was in existence at the time she signed the Guarantee. Had the applicant released some of its security provided by Trigger, that action would have resulted in a materially different risk being imposed on Ms. Gdak, which would likely have altered her liability under the Guarantee. The subject advances, which were specifically contemplated in language of the Guarantee, do not, in my view, result in a materially different risk for Ms. Gdak than the one to which she agreed.

Contra preferentem

[58] In the alternative, Ms. Gdak asserts that where there has been a waiver of material change, as I have found in this case, the guarantee language must be read narrowly, to protect the guarantor where the guarantor is a family member and unsophisticated or vulnerable. Ms. Gdak relies on *Conlin* in support of this submission, and in particular para. 8 where Cory J. states that "if there is any ambiguity in the terms of the guarantee, the words of the documents should be construed against the party which drew it."

[59] Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak are husband and wife. However, Ms. Gdak is also a director, officer, employee and shareholder of Trigger. There is no evidence to support the theory that she signed the Guarantee as a matter of accommodation or a favour for her husband.

[60] When Mr. Rees, on behalf of the applicant, was discussing the original financing arrangements with Mr. Gdak, Mr. Gdak provided him with corporate charts for Trigger and En Cadre. The corporate chart for Trigger showed Ms. Gdak to be a “Co-Owner” and “SVP.” The notes to the corporate chart described Ms. Gdak as Mr. Gdak’s “wife and business partner” and “a 50% owner of the company (the new operations company and the holding company).” In my view, it is more likely than not that Ms. Gdak signed her Guarantee in the capacity of a business owner, and not as a family member.

[61] As a director, Ms. Gdak would have been required to sign off on the financial statements for these companies. The annual financial statements would have reflected the indebtedness to the applicant, which would have been easy for her to track year over year.

[62] Also, based on the record, I do not find Ms. Gdak to be unsophisticated. The only real evidence she submits in support of this assertion is that she did not finish high school. Lack of a high school diploma, in my view, does not equate to a lack of sophistication. Nor does it, in my view, indicate a lack of intelligence or an inability to read and comprehend a one-page guarantee, written in the second person. Based on the record, Ms. Gdak had significant involvement in Trigger’s day-to-day operations. She had responsibility for handling of accounts receivable, writing cheques and making bank deposits. She was in regular communication with the applicant regarding accounts receivable and the assignment of those accounts, as well as reporting on what funds were deposited into the blocked account and when.

[63] Accordingly, I find that a narrow interpretation of the terms of the Guarantee is not warranted in this case. Had I decided this point differently, I would nonetheless have rejected Ms. Gdak’s interpretation of the definition of “Obligations” in the Guarantee. “Obligations” is defined to include “all present, and future lease payments and obligations, conditional sale instalments and obligations, and any other debts and liabilities.” Ms. Gdak submits that the *ejusdem generis* interpretation maxim ought to apply such that “any other debts and liabilities” must be read narrowly to include only debts of the same class or kind, being debts of a similar nature to lease payments and conditional sale instalments, and that the applicant has led no evidence of indebtedness that falls into that class.

[64] I reject this highly technical interpretation. I agree with the applicant that the phrase “other debts and liabilities” covers each of the credit facilities that the applicant offered and provided to Trigger. It would have been obvious to the parties entering into the financing arrangements that the Guarantees were in respect of the funds being advanced in accordance with the April 23, 2015 funding proposal. That proposal specifically refers to the credit being advanced and the Guarantees of each of En Cadre, Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak. Trigger’s credit facilities did not include lease payments or conditional sale instalments. It is therefore apparent that the Guarantees were intended to cover other debts and liabilities, such as those described in the April 23, 2015 funding proposal and advanced by the applicant. This is the only logical interpretation of the Guarantee considering the factual matrix at the time the credit facility documentation, including the Guarantees, was executed.

Independent legal advice

[65] Ms. Gdak asserts that she should not be found to be liable on her Guarantee because she was not given an opportunity to obtain independent legal advice on the Guarantee, or any amendments to the credit arrangements. Notwithstanding that she signed the Guarantee in the presence of a lawyer, Mr. Kelly, who witnessed her signature, she asserts that Mr. Kelly was counsel to Trigger and not to her.

[66] Ms. Gdak further asserts that she had never consulted with the applicant, or its counsel, in respect of the Guarantee, and that there was an inequality of bargaining power to her disadvantage.

[67] The applicant asserts that, because Ms. Gdak was a director of Trigger, independent legal advice in respect of her Guarantee was not required.

[68] The lack of independent legal advice, on its own, is not fatal to a claim on a guarantee, absent undue influence, unconscionability, fraud, misrepresentation or evidence supporting a defence of *non est factum*: *RBC v. 164393*, 2019 ONSC 5145 at para. 54, citing *Bank of Montreal v. Featherstone*, 58 D.L.R. (4th) 567 (Ont. C.A.).

[69] A party asserting unconscionability must make out an inequality of bargaining power and a resulting improvident bargain: *Uber Technologies Inc. v. Heller*, 2020 SCC 16, 3 B.L.R. (6th) 1 at para. 65.

[70] Ms. Gdak submits that there was an inequality of bargaining power between her and the applicant. As evidence of her lack of sophistication, she submits that she never completed high school and needed clarification during her examination by the Receiver that a “charge” was another word for “mortgage.” By contrast, she submits that the applicant purports to be in the business of providing financing to medium-sized businesses in Ontario, through factoring accounts receivable, and that the applicant’s point of contact, Mr. Rees, had 35 years of experience in banking and lending in Canada and the United Kingdom. Accordingly, Ms. Gdak submits that there is a significant gulf in sophistication. She submits that the improvident bargain is manifest in the growth of the debt from \$1.4 million to over \$48 million with no input or participation from her.

[71] As noted, I do not accept that Ms. Gdak was unsophisticated. On a balance of probabilities, I find that she was not entirely unaware of, or uninformed as to, the debt that Trigger was incurring. Ms. Gdak was a director and officer of each of Trigger and En Cadre when she signed the Guarantee. As a director she was responsible for signing off on the financial statements of these companies, which would have disclosed the companies’ indebtedness.

[72] Ms. Gdak is the sole director, officer and shareholder of the respondent Jaimark Properties Inc. (“Jaimark”), which owns or owned several valuable real properties. Based on the record, Ms. Gdak, either on behalf of Jaimark, or personally, has entered into agreements of purchase and sale and a licence agreement as part of transactions in respect of which she sought the advice of legal counsel.

[73] On examination, Ms. Gdak deposed that she did not know that she was a director of Trigger and En Cadre. She also deposed that she did not have a title and that at Trigger she took on jobs like taking photographs for marketing materials, building a website, and “administrative roles.”

[74] I do not accept Ms. Gdak’s evidence that she did not have a title at Trigger or that she took on only administrative roles there. At the time of the hearing, the applicant had not had an opportunity to review the large volume of emails retrieved by the Receiver from computers at Trigger. Even so, the record is replete with examples of Ms. Gdak’s involvement and responsibilities at Trigger, as evidenced by numerous emails.

[75] Apart from Mr. Gdak promoting Ms. Gdak as his “business partner”, her involvement in Trigger’s business was recognized by others at Trigger as well. In an email from Mr. Nero to Mr. Rees, dated May 13, 2015, in response to Mr. Rees’ concerns about accounts receivables and other matters, Mr. Nero stated: “As for the A/R, I understand the pressure point, Jaimee [Ms. Gdak] and I are going to be finally handling this moving forward.”

[76] Alexandra Kanichis, the Director of Operations at the applicant, and the partner who supervised the Trigger credit facilities, deposed that Ms. Gdak was involved with daily accounting operations at Trigger and that “literally hundreds of emails have been exchanged” between Ms. Gdak, Ms. Kanichis and the applicant’s administration team with respect to processing credit card payments, deposits made into the BMO blocked account and deposits made into a BMO account of non-factored payments, and funding requests to the applicant.

[77] Under examination, Ms. Gdak agreed that Ms. Kanichis’ statement about the number of emails exchanged between them “could be accurate.”

[78] Ms. Gdak also deposed that prior to 2020 she worked four or five hours a day at Trigger, but that she did not do much work for Trigger in 2020.

[79] However, in an email to Mr. Rees on June 11, 2020, Mr. Gdak notes that Ms. Gdak did not “facilitate the cashing of cheques”, as expected, because she was at the hospital, and that he would provide a solution for this concern of the applicant. In the same email, Mr. Gdak describes a “Process Change” at Trigger to “ensure future success/compliance” which involves a “signoff on the previous weeks activity (bank accounts, sales, shipping, purchases, transfers, expenses, etc.) on the Monday following the previous week from 830am-12 pm each week. This will be completed by Mark, Mike, Jaimee [Ms. Gdak], Amy and Phil (*sic*).” In an email to the applicant dated December 11, 2019, Mr. Gdak advises that “Mike, Jaimee [Ms. Gdak] and I are all at RLB [the accountants] today (working with them to close several projects) and then RLB is at our facility Thursday and Friday. We are scrambling to get our accounting up until current day.” In another report to the applicant, dated December 26, 2019, Mr. Gdak reports that Ms. Gdak is “mapping our payment for deposits” on five specified days between December 27, 2019 and January 3, 2020.

[80] Ms. Kanichis deposed that at a meeting at Trigger on October 1, 2020 between Mr. Gdak and Mr. Nero, from Trigger, and Ms. Kanichis and Glenn Peterson (president and director), from

the applicant, Mr. Gdak advised that Ms. Gdak was working from home because of the global pandemic, but that she was making collection calls on all the past due accounts of independent stores.

[81] Ms. Kanichis' evidence includes several email exchanges between Ms. Gdak and the applicant, as well as a copy of an Assignment Schedule summarizing alleged sales of firearms to purchasers, totaling over \$185,000. Ms. Gdak included the invoices in support of the alleged sales and alleged proof of delivery by courier for each sale. Together with these documents, Ms. Gdak sent an email to Ms. Kanichis confirming that these documents had been "successfully uploaded."

[82] I do not find Ms. Gdak's evidence that she did not know that she was a director of Trigger credible.

[83] There is reliable evidence to show that Ms. Gdak, in fact, held herself out as a vice president, which she noted when signing documents on behalf of Trigger or En Cadre.

[84] Ms. Gdak had authority to write and sign cheques on behalf of Trigger. Ms. Kanichis' evidence included copies of many cheques written and signed by Ms. Gdak on behalf of Trigger. Many of these cheques were in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

[85] Ms. Kanichis also deposed that Ms. Gdak was "deeply involved in the day-to-day financial administration of Trigger and takes an active part in managing the financial and accounts receivable side of Trigger's business. She is one of the individuals at Trigger whom I would describe as part of the senior management team." Ms. Kanichis adduced a series of update emails from Ms. Gdak to the applicant that show that Ms. Gdak was one of the primary persons responsible for collection of accounts receivable at Trigger; was one of the individuals who personally handled cheques as they were received by Trigger from its customers; and who deposited cheques into the BMO blocked account and reported to the applicant on the deposits. Mr. Rees deposed that Ms. Gdak served in a "senior accounts receivable collection capacity." Neither Ms. Kanichis nor Mr. Rees was cross-examined on their respective affidavits.

[86] Ms. Kanichis also deposed that Ms. Gdak had ready access to the status of Trigger's indebtedness. Ms. Kanichis deposed that the applicant used software called "Cadence", which allowed its customers, like Trigger, to upload documents, such as invoices to be factored, and to view and update their precise financial position *vis-à-vis* the applicant, including their indebtedness to the applicant. According to Ms. Kanichis' evidence, it was Ms. Gdak who frequently accessed Cadence to upload invoices and bills of lading until Mr. Nero took over this function in 2018. The applicant's records show that Ms. Gdak last logged on to Cadence on February 21, 2018 to upload a number of invoices and bills of lading. Later that same day, Ms. Gdak sent an email to Ms. Kanichis confirming a successful uploading of "invoices and POD's."

[87] Ms. Kanichis further deposed that, like any user of Cadence, Ms. Gdak would have seen a standard-form opening screen that showed the current balance of the account. According to Ms. Kanichis' evidence, on February 21, 2018, Trigger's balance stood at \$8,404,091. In addition to

the balance, the screen would have shown a bar chart showing Trigger's purchase and collection history. Accordingly, I find that it ought to have been apparent to Ms. Gdak on February 21, 2018, that her liability on her Guarantee exceeded the original \$900,000 loan shown on the credit facility documents by a considerable margin.

[88] Ms. Gdak does not deny that she accessed the Cadence program, but she deposed that she used it on rare occasions and needed technical assistance with it. She deposed that she had "no recollection" of seeing the opening screen described by Ms. Kanichis. On a balance of probabilities, I find that while Ms. Gdak may not have known that Trigger's indebtedness had grown to over \$48 million, it is more likely than not that she knew the indebtedness was considerably greater than \$900,000. The information was readily available to her. Even if she did not choose to access the information using the Cadence system, she could have made inquiries of Ms. Kanichis with whom she was in regular contact. Ms. Gdak took no steps to try to limit her exposure on the Guarantee.

[89] The applicant argues that it had no duty to advise Ms. Gdak to obtain independent legal advice because she was a director of Trigger. It relies on the case of *Meridian Credit Union Limited v. 2428128 Ontario Limited*, 2017 ONSC 4578, 73 B.L.R. (5th) 262, in which the court found that independent legal advice is not required prior to the signing of a guarantee if the guaranteeing party is an officer and director of the corporation receiving the loan, citing *Toronto-Dominion Bank v. 1503345 Ontario Ltd.*, [2006] O.J. No. 1960 (ONSC).

[90] I do not agree entirely with the applicant's conclusion. The analysis in *Meridian* was considered in the more recent decision of Glustein J. in *Royal Bank of Canada v. 2414973*, 2020 ONSC 6047, where the court held that the principle enunciated in *Meridian* only applies where a party pleads that the guarantee is "invalidated" because of a lack of independent legal advice at the time the guarantee was signed.

[91] Where a guarantor is raising the lack of independent legal advice to "invalidate" the guarantee, the fact that the guarantor was a director may be determinative. However, whether or not a party was a director of the corporation, the presence or absence of independent legal advice remains relevant where that party is raising the defence of unconscionability, and arguing that the party did not have an opportunity to review the guarantee with counsel who might have identified an inequality of bargaining power and a resulting improvident bargain.

[92] Where a guarantor relies on a lack of independent legal advice in raising a defence of unconscionability, *non est factum*, misrepresentation or the like, the fact that the guarantor is a director is only a factor to be considered. In such cases, merely holding the title of "director" does not necessarily alleviate the need for independent legal advice. Rather, the overriding question remains whether the guarantee is tainted by the presence of undue influence, unconscionability or similar circumstances of improper tactics, and whether the lender should have been put on notice of same. Where a spouse lacks sophistication or meaningful involvement with the corporation, the mere fact that he or she holds the title of "director" should not preclude the defence of unconscionability: see, for example, *Royal Bank v. Hussain*, [1997] 38 B.L.R. (2d) 92.

[93] In my view, Ms. Gdak was not a director in name only. Nor do I find that she performed only administrative tasks at Trigger or that she had no knowledge of the increase of the indebtedness of Trigger to the applicant, such that her dealings with the applicant are tainted by unconscionability.

[94] I am also not satisfied that Ms. Gdak did not have the opportunity to review her Guarantee with counsel. All the credit facility documents were signed in the presence of and witnessed by a lawyer, Mr. Kelly, of Kelly & Co. Ms. Gdak asserts that Mr. Kelly was the lawyer for Trigger and not her lawyer. However, in her examination, when questioned about documents relating to the sale of a condominium owned by her, in September 2020, and in particular about the reference to “Kelly & Co.” on the agreement of purchase and sale, Ms. Gdak stated that “they are our lawyers.” There is no documentary evidence before the court with respect to the nature and extent of Kelly & Co’s retainer *vis-à-vis* Trigger, En Cadre, Mr. Gdak and Ms. Gdak.

[95] Ms. Gdak has not met her onus to show an inequality of bargaining power and a resulting improvident bargain. I am not persuaded that Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee transaction was tainted by the presence of unconscionability or improper tactics such that the applicant ought to have been put on notice of such and encouraged her to obtain independent legal advice.

Did the applicant release Ms. Gdak from her Guarantee?

[96] Ms. Gdak asserts that the applicant released Ms. Gdak from her Guarantee through its words and conduct, and it is now estopped from asserting that the negotiations relating to Ms. Gdak’s release from her Guarantee were never consummated.

[97] For the reasons that follow, I find that the applicant did not conduct itself in a way that constituted a waiver of Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee. Paragraph 17 of the Guarantee clearly states that no waiver of the Guarantee or any of its terms or conditions shall be binding on the applicant unless expressly made in writing by the applicant. The applicant made no such express writing.

[98] As set out in *Maracle v. Travellers Indemnity Co. of Canada*, [1991] 2 S.C.R. 50, a party seeking to rely on promissory estoppel must show that:

- (a) the other party made a promise or assurance, through words or conduct, that was intended to affect the legal relationship between them and was to be acted on; and
- (b) in reliance on the representation, the representee changed her position.

[99] Ms. Gdak asserts that on multiple occasions the applicant represented that it had released her from her Guarantee. Ms. Gdak further asserts she changed her position in reliance on this conduct. For example, she deposed that, based on this reliance, she accepted a transfer of Mr. Gdak’s one-half interest in their family home to separate business assets from personal assets.

[100] In my view, Ms. Gdak has not made out promissory estoppel. She has not established that the applicant represented that it had released her from her Guarantee, nor that she relied on that representation to her detriment.

[101] In support of her argument that her Guarantee was released through the conduct of the applicant, Ms. Gdak relies primarily on the Proposal (dated May 2, 2019) sent by Mr. Rees to Mr. Gdak. The Proposal contemplates a renewal of the existing MPSA and a termination of the existing Royalty Agreement, among other things. Under the section “Additional Information and Agreement” it states: “No Personal Guarantees moving forward from Jaimee Gdak.” Below, in the same section, it states:

The foregoing Proposal does not constitute an offer, commitment or binding agreement to enter the Amended Credit Facilities unless and until approved by ClearFlow’s Credit Committee and/or Board in writing and execution of Documentation as described herein. ... Trigger Wholesale also authorizes ClearFlow to share this information with ClearFlow’s affiliates, assigns, lenders, designees or other third parties ClearFlow deems necessary to receive the appropriate approvals.

[102] Ms. Gdak asserts that, based on this provision, the only part of the Proposal, which was not a binding agreement, was the part that dealt specifically with the two credit facilities, being the MPSA and the Royalty Agreement. She further asserts that it naturally followed that the section dealing with Additional Information and Agreement, which followed the section dealing with the credit facilities, was binding and indeed an “agreement”, which included the agreement that there would be no personal guarantees moving forward from Ms. Gdak. Both Mr. Gdak and Mr. Rees signed the Proposal on May 6, 2019.

[103] I find this interpretation, too, to be highly technical, and neither correct nor commercially reasonable. Even if it could be said that the parties agreed to treat the Amended Credit Facilities as distinct from the Guarantees, and not as part of the same package of credit documents as presented to Trigger in 2019, the language in the Proposal nonetheless affirms that “moving forward” Ms. Gdak will not be asked to provide a personal guarantee. “Moving forward” anticipates the execution of the Amended Credit Facilities. It is implicit that if the Amended Credit Facilities were not approved by ClearFlow’s Credit Committee and/or its Board, in writing, the restructuring would not advance, and, in that case, Ms. Gdak would not be relieved of her Guarantee obligations. An agreement to relieve Ms. Gdak from entering into a fresh guarantee as part of the credit restructuring is not the equivalent of a waiver of her existing Guarantee. A waiver of the existing Guarantee, by its terms, must be in writing by the applicant.

[104] There is no evidence of any such waiver by the applicant. Further, based on the testimony of the president of the applicant, Mr. Peterson, in order to be binding on the applicant, the waiver would have had to be signed by the Board of Directors comprised Randy Rutherford and himself. Mr. Rees did not have the authority to waive Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee.

[105] Ms. Gdak confirmed that she was not involved in the negotiations regarding the credit restructuring. There is no evidence of any representation having been made to her by the applicant regarding her Guarantee. It was Mr. Gdak who was involved in the negotiations relating to the credit restructuring. Based on the evidentiary record, Mr. Gdak appreciated that Ms. Gdak's Guarantee had not been waived on May 6, 2020, when he accepted the Proposal. Mr. Petersen deposed that on May 6, 2020, he and others met with Mr. Gdak in Trigger's parking lot following their earlier meeting. Then and there, Mr. Gdak emphasized his desire that Ms. Gdak's Guarantee be released. Mr. Petersen's evidence is that he explained to Mr. Gdak that "that should be possible when the new expanded facility and MPSA agreements were finalized."

[106] Shortly thereafter, when Trigger's financial statements were not forthcoming, Mr. Rees sent Mr. Gdak an email advising him that the applicant was imposing an additional condition precedent to the credit restructuring – a third party field audit. Attached to Mr. Rees' email was a checklist of items that would need to be satisfied before the applicant would consider moving forward with the proposed restructuring of the credit facilities.

[107] Mr. Gdak's conduct after the May 6, 2019 meeting reinforces that he appreciated that Ms. Gdak's Guarantee had not been released.

[108] On May 16, 2019, Mr. Rees sent an email attaching draft documents to reflect the terms set out in the Proposal. Nowhere in his covering email does Mr. Rees state that the documents are in execution form or ready for signature. While he does not specifically state in his email that the documents are drafts, he does state that he will send copies of the existing signed documents "for Brian Kelly's reference/convenience." This statement suggests that the documents are drafts to be reviewed by Trigger's counsel, Mr. Kelly. In the same email, Mr. Rees provides the contact details for the applicant's counsel, which further reinforces that the attached documents are drafts to be negotiated and finalized between counsel. Mr. Rees does not ask Mr. Gdak to sign and return these documents. The documents do not include a waiver of Ms. Gdak's Guarantee. Mr. Rees later deposed that the documents he sent on May 16, 2019 were indeed drafts for review by legal counsel.

[109] A few months later, on July 2, 2019, Mr. Nero, of Trigger, on behalf of Mr. Gdak, returned the documents signed by Mr. Gdak to Mr. Rees via email.

[110] On July 3, 2019, Mr. Nero, on behalf of Mr. Gdak, wrote to Mr. Rees asking for copies of the documents signed by the applicant and "the release letter you confirmed would be sent discharging Jaimee's obligations." This inquiry confirms Mr. Nero's understanding that, as of July 3, 2019, Ms. Gdak's obligations under the Guarantee had not been discharged.

[111] Mr. Rees replied the same day stating that he "will prepare a letter of confirmation that the Guarantee of Jamie (*sic*) has been cancelled." I accept Mr. Rees' evidence that he never intended to indicate that the applicant had agreed to release Ms. Gdak's Guarantee, and that he neither had instructions from the applicant to release the Guarantee, nor any authority to do so. Mr. Rees knew that the release of the Guarantee was conditional on Trigger providing the requested financial

statements. For that reason, he included this reminder in his email reply: “We do need the Financial Statements to implement the documents-it’s a condition.”

[112] On July 9, 2019, Mr. Rees sent an email to Mr. Gdak indicating that “Glenn will sign off the original legal documents when next in Toronto.” This statement can only be interpreted in the context of the entire transaction. At that time, both the applicant and Mr. Gdak were aware of the conditions precedent that needed to be fulfilled before the credit restructuring, including the release of Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee, would be approved. Those conditions included a review of Trigger’s financial statements for 2019 and 2020 in a form prescribed by the applicant as well as a satisfactory field audit.

[113] Mr. Gdak was fully aware of the conditions precedent to the proposed credit restructuring, which could have resulted in the release of Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee. Notwithstanding that Mr. Gdak returned signed documents to the applicant on July 2, 2019, he understood that the credit facilities would not be restructured until the conditions were met. Nearly a year later, on June 11, 2020, Mr. Gdak sent an email to Mr. Rees in which Mr. Gdak, himself, lists the “Conditions Precedent”, which include “Review Engagement Fiscal 2019”, “Management Prepared Financial Statement 2020” and “Field Audit by Steven Adler”, and he reports on the status of each with a commitment that Trigger will deliver the 2020 Review Engagement by July 31, 2020.

[114] Mr. Rees deposed that the draft “Acknowledgement” of the waiver of Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee, which had been included in the package of draft documents sent for review by counsel, was only sent to Mr. Gdak as an example of the type of acknowledgement that could be signed if there were agreement on all the other terms relating to the restructuring and all of the conditions precedent had been met. It was not an express waiver of Ms. Gdak’s existing Guarantee.

[115] Because financial statements in the form requested by the applicant were never delivered, and because Trigger failed the field audit, the conditions of the credit restructuring were never met. Neither the draft Acknowledgement, nor any other document expressly releasing Ms. Gdak from her Guarantee, was ever finalized, or signed by the applicant, and she was never released from her Guarantee by any means.

[116] It defies logic that Ms. Gdak or Mr. Gdak would have believed that the applicant would have agreed to the waiver of Ms. Gdak’s Guarantee or any other Guarantee in July 2019. At that time, Trigger had not provided its financial statements for fiscal 2019 and fiscal 2020, or met the condition for a satisfactory field audit. The applicant had not signed a single document to give effect to the restructuring of the credit facilities.

[117] On June 19, 2020, prior to the completion of the field audit, Mr. Gdak returned to the applicant a signed version of the MPSA, which he had unilaterally backdated to July 3, 2019. The applicant’s evidence is that it never considered that document to be legally binding because, not only had no one on behalf of the applicant signed the document, but also the MPSA was but one part of a package of documents the whole of which formed the basis for the restructuring and

renewal of the credit facilities. Until all of them were approved and signed by both parties, Ms. Gdak's Guarantee would not be released.

[118] Mr. Gdak did not provide 2019 Review Engagement statements until June 25, 2020, 86 days following the fiscal year end, and he never produced the most recent 2020 financial statements on a Review Engagement basis, as requested by the applicant. Rather, he produced internal monthly statements for fiscal 2020. These financial statements were not accurate, and they were not acceptable to the applicant. By this time, the applicant was also aware that the field audit had uncovered extensive activities at Trigger that it believed to be fraudulent.

Is Mr. Gdak liable pursuant to his Guarantee?

[119] As noted above, Mr. Gdak did not deny liability pursuant to his Guarantee, and he did not file any responding materials on this motion with respect to his Guarantee. I agree with the applicant that judgment in respect of his liability should issue on an unopposed basis.

Disposition

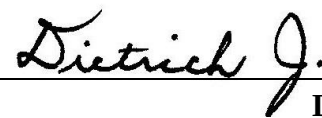
[120] A Judgment shall issue declaring:

- (a) the personal Guarantee executed by the respondent, Mark Gdak, in favour of the applicant, ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp., in respect of the indebtedness of Trigger Wholesale Inc., dated April 30, 2015, enforceable; and
- (b) the personal Guarantee executed by the respondent Jaimee Lynn Gdak in favour of the applicant, ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp., in respect of the indebtedness of Trigger Wholesale Inc., dated April 30, 2015, enforceable.

The parties and the Receiver may arrange a case conference to address the quantum of the liability on the Guarantees.

Costs

[121] Any party seeking costs in this matter may serve and file written costs submissions not exceeding three pages in length (excluding a costs outline and offers to settle, if any) within ten days of these reasons. Any party wishing to respond to such written submissions shall serve and file similar written costs submissions within ten days thereafter.


Dietrich J.

Released: May 26, 2021

CITATION: ClearFlow Commercial Finance Corp. v. Trigger Wholesale Inc., 2021 ONSC 3421
COURT FILE NO.: CV-20-00649154-00CL
DATE: 20210526

ONTARIO

SUPERIOR COURT OF JUSTICE

BETWEEN:

CLEARFLOW COMMERCIAL FINANCE CORP.

Applicant/Moving Party

– and –

TRIGGER WHOLESALE INC., THE EN CADRE
GROUP INC., MARK GDAK, JAIMEE LYNN GDAK
and JAIMAK REAL PROPERTIES INC.

Respondents/Responding Parties

REASONS FOR JUDGMENT

Dietrich J.

Released: May 26, 2021