

Sexual Harassment Not So 'Friend'-ly

By Reg P. Wydeven
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While 'Friends' was one of the most popular TV shows of all time, some of the show's writing staff felt the creative process behind the funny and risqué scripts was anything but jovial.

One of the show's assistants, Amaani Lyle, was so disenchanted with writers' meetings that she filed a lawsuit against Warner Bros. Television Productions for sexual harassment. Lyle alleged that during meetings, writers would openly discuss their sex lives and the sex lives of the actors, amounting to a hostile work environment.

Warner Bros. admitted that while sexually explicit discussions took place at meetings, they were vital to the creative process of writing for the show. Further, Warner Bros. Claimed that when Lyle was hired she was warned of the saucy talks.

Four months into the job, Lyle was fired because she couldn't effectively transcribe or capture the flavor of the meetings. She then filed her suit against Warner Bros., which the California Supreme Court threw out last month, stating "most of the sexually coarse and vulgar language at issue did not involve and was not aimed at plaintiff or other women in the workplace."

Apparently TV shows are conducive to harassment. Bianca Nardi, a former producer on the Maury Povich Show, is suing Povich, NBC Universal Television, Inc. and three other producers for \$100 million for sexual harassment.

Nardi alleges that another producer ordered her to dress provocatively, wear a hidden camera, and secretly videotape married men agreeing to have sex with her. This producer also ordered her to be videotaped topless for scenes that were shown in bars and for guests of the show.

Nardi further alleges that Povich's "longtime, intimate and sexual relationship" with another producer and co-defendant created a sexually hostile workplace. Nardi claims this producer "used her position and relationship" with Povich to her advantage, including forcing Nardi to do part of her job or be fired. Nardi contends that this producer even asked her to arrange for a hotel room for the producer and Povich to have a romantic rendezvous to celebrate a successful interview with Michael Jackson.

Lyle and Nardi, along with other victims of sexual harassment, will be paying close attention to a case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court that will decide what employers can legally do to employees who complain of harassment or discrimination.

The case involves Sheila White, a female forklift operator, who complained that her foreman at the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. was sexually harassing her. The foreman was disciplined, but White was transferred to a more physically demanding job. After she filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, White was then suspended without pay for 37 days. White then successfully sued the railroad for retaliation and was awarded \$43,000.

The railroad is now asking the Supreme Court to overturn this decision, claiming that allowing these retaliation claims will create a "super-protected class" of employees who can't be disciplined or transferred once they file a discrimination complaint.

Labor unions and women's groups disagree and feel businesses should not be allowed to use seemingly innocuous schedule changes or transfers to subtly warn workers to not file complaints.

Given the popularity of reality television, TV producers would probably get better ratings videotaping workplaces, including their own, rather than paying writers to come up with risqué plotlines.

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