

A Baby by any Other Name

By Reg P. Wydeven

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My wife, mom and sister all love reading celebrity gossip magazines like 'Us' and 'People.' While I don't care about such blather, I do feel compelled to read these magazines just to stay current with celebrity legal issues, such as the possible deportation of Justin Bieber back to Canada.

In 'Us,' the celebrity crime blotter can be found in 'The Record' section, whereas in 'People,' the section is called 'Passage.' These columns also detail celebrity divorces, deaths and, of course, birth announcements. It seems that lately celebrities are trying to outdo one another with unorthodox baby names.

Some notable monikers include Jason Lee's son, Pilot Inspektor, Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter, Apple, Beyonce's daughter Blu, Kim Kardashian's daughter, North West, and my personal favorite, Penn Jillette's (of Penn & Teller) daughter, Moxie Crimefighter.

Assuming many of these kids will get picked on when they get to school, you almost wish you could do something to change their names. One Tennessee judge did just that.

Lu Ann Ballew was a child support magistrate in Newport, Tennessee. Last August, Jalessa Martin and Jawaan McCullough appeared in front of Ballew for a child support hearing. The hearing involved the pair's seven-month-old son, Messiah Martin. As part of the hearing, McCullough asked that the baby's last name be changed to his.

Instead, Ballew ordered that the baby take both parents' surnames, so she officially named him Martin McCullough. When making her order, Ballew indicated that she felt the name "Messiah" was not in the baby's best interests. In her written decision she claimed, "Labeling this child 'Messiah' places an undue burden on him that as a human being, he cannot fulfill."

She further explained that the name would likely offend the population of Cocke County, where many residents are Christian.

To no one's surprise, the decision caused a national shockwave. Wisconsin's own Freedom from Religion Foundation even filed a complaint with the Board of Judicial Conduct.

In response to the controversy, Ballew's boss, Duane Slone, Tennessee's fourth judicial district head judge, fired her last week and appointed a new magistrate. Rex Henry Ogle, another judge in the district, said that the decision to terminate Ballew was made by a group of local judges and changing Messiah's name was just one factor in that decision.

Ballew's decision was ultimately overturned in chancery court, and both parents agreed to name the baby Messiah McCullough.

On March 3, Ballew will have to appear at a hearing to decide on whether her order to change Messiah's name violated Tennessee's Code of Judicial Conduct. One of the tenets of the Code requires judges to perform all duties without bias or prejudice based on religion.

I think Ballew should get a job filling out birth certificates in Hollywood.

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