

Reality TV a Little Too Real

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Fall is my favorite time of year. My birthday is in September, the Packers are playing again, and best of all, another new season of television is upon us. This year there seem to be fewer reality TV shows - maybe it's because the networks are afraid of being sued.

Deleese Williams sued ABC, and its parent company, The Walt Disney Co., after the producers of Extreme Makeover withdrew their offer to give Williams plastic surgery that would give her a "Cinderella-like" transformation. They withdrew the offer just hours before she was to undergo the surgery because her recovery time wouldn't fit into their schedule.

Williams is seeking over \$1 million in damages for breach of contract, willful infliction of emotional distress and negligence. When she was initially selected to be a contestant on the show, Williams was videotaped recounting the humiliation she suffered as a child because of her homeliness. ABC also videotaped her husband and sisters discussing her appearance. Williams' suit alleges the show's producers encouraged them to make disparaging comments about her looks.

When the producers cancelled her participation, Williams claimed her sister, Kellie McGee, was so wracked with guilt over the cruel remarks she made about Williams' appearance that she killed herself. Williams is now so upset and self-conscious she can no longer go out in public.

ABC was also sued by five orphaned siblings who appeared on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition for fraud and breach of contract. The siblings said the family that took them in after their parents died later drove them out of the nine-bedroom mansion that was built for them.

Extreme Makeover is not the only show that spurred a lawsuit.

* The family of Scott Amedure sued Warner Bros., the parent corporation of the Jenny Jones Show, for \$50 million for negligence after Amedure appeared on the show and revealed that he had a secret, same-sex crush on Jonathan Schmitz. Three days after the taping, Schmitz went to Amedure's home and killed him with a shotgun. Warner Bros. was found negligent and ordered to pay \$25 million in damages, plus burial costs. This decision was overturned on appeal, however, where the appellate court explained that while the Jenny Jones Show might be "regarded as the epitome of bad taste and sensationalism," but that wasn't enough to make it liable for Amedure's death. Schmitz was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 25 to 50 years in prison.

* Jeffrey Campbell sued the Jerry Springer Show and its distributor, Universal Studios Television, after his mother, Nancy Campbell-Panitz, was murdered by her ex-husband, Ralf Panitz. She was killed in an altercation with Panitz only hours after the airing of the episode where he revealed to her that although they were still living together, he had secretly remarried.

* Two friends of Larry Kieper were indicted for the murder of Kieper's girlfriend, Charlene Burkey, after the couple appeared on Robin Givens' short-lived show Forgive or Forget. During the episode called "You're 17, Quit Making Babies," her friend Nora Ibrahim tried to convince Burkey to dump Kieper. Burkey slapped Kieper on the air and again on the plane ride home after he repeatedly called her a "ho." Burkey died the day her appearance on Forgive or Forget aired.

Those stories make my favorite reality television, Packer games, seem not quite so depressing.

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