

LAW REVIEW

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DEBUNKING THE STELLA AWARDS'

Most of you have seen the so-called “Stella Awards” floating around the Internet – named for Stella Liebeck who spilled coffee on herself and successfully sued McDonalds. The Stella Awards purport to be true stories of a legal system gone awry, generally where undeserving people reap million dollar awards for preposterous legal claims.

The stories have always bothered me – too outrageous to be true – at least in my little, legally-trained mind.

Well, we now have documented proof that the Stella Awards' cases (below) are fabricated. To see for yourself check out www.stellaawards.com/bogus.html and www.snopes.com. Snopes debunks “urban legends” with actual research. It is widely considered a legitimate web site -- with a topical list of investigated true stories, from automobiles to the Titanic, with humor, law and sex in between. Check out the declaration of the young boy who allegedly slept with Michael Jackson, first revealed on The Smoking Gun web page, under www.snopes.com/legal/jackson.htm. Who said this column is only about the law?

So here are the *untrue* but humorous-as-hell “Stella Awards,” designed and guaranteed to make you hate lawyers:

- Kathleen Robertson of Austin, Texas, was awarded \$780,000 by a jury after breaking her ankle tripping over a toddler who was running amuck inside a furniture store. The owners of the store were understandably surprised at the verdict, considering the misbehaving tyke was Ms. Robertson's son.
- Carl Truman, 19, of Los Angeles won \$74,000 and medical expenses when his neighbor ran his hand over with a Honda Accord. Mr. Truman apparently didn't notice someone was at the wheel of the car whose hubcap he was trying to steal.
- Terrence Dickson of Bristol, Penn., was exiting a house he finished robbing by way of the garage. He was not able to get the garage door to go up because the automatic door opener was malfunctioning. He couldn't re-enter the house because the door connecting the house and garage locked when he pulled it shut. The family was on vacation, so Mr. Dickson found himself locked in the garage for eight days. He subsisted on a case of Pepsi he found, and a large bag of dry dog food. Dickson sued the homeowner's insurance claiming the situation caused him undue mental anguish. The jury agreed to the tune of half a million dollars and change.
- Jerry Williams of Little Rock, Arkansas, was awarded \$14,500 and medical expenses after being bitten on the buttocks by his next door neighbor's beagle. The beagle was on a chain in its owner's

fenced-in yard, as was Mr. Williams. The award was less than sought after because the jury felt the dog may have been provoked by Mr. Williams who, at the time, was shooting it repeatedly with a pellet gun.

- A Philadelphia restaurant was ordered to pay Amber Carson of Lancaster, Pennsylvania \$113,500 after she slipped on a spilled soft drink and broke her coccyx. The beverage was on the floor because Ms. Carson threw it at her boyfriend 30 seconds earlier during an argument.
- Kara Walton of Claymont, Delaware, successfully sued the owner of a nightclub in a neighboring city when she fell from the bathroom window to the floor and knocked out her two front teeth. This occurred while Ms. Walton was trying to sneak through the window in the ladies room to avoid paying the \$3.50 cover charge. She was awarded \$12,000 and dental expenses.
- In November 2000, Mr. Grazinski purchased a brand new 32-foot Winnebago motor home. On his first trip home, having joined the freeway, he set the cruise control at 70 mph and calmly left the drivers seat to go into the back and make himself a cup of coffee. Not surprisingly, the Winnie left the freeway, crashed and overturned. Mr. Grazinski sued Winnebago for not advising him in the handbook that he could not actually do this. He was awarded \$1,750,000 plus a new Winnebago.

- And just so you know that cooler heads do occasionally prevail:
Kenmore Inc., the makers of Dorothy Johnson's microwave, were found not liable for the death of Mrs. Johnson's poodle after she gave it a bath and attempted to dry it by putting the poor creature in her microwave for, "just a few minutes, on low," The case was quickly dismissed.

Remember, these true stories aren't.

This is a reprint of a 2003 Law Review as folks continue to send me the "Stella Awards" as though gospel.

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