Female TV Lawyers: Ladies or Tramps?

Gabriela Steier
COMMON LAW: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA MISCONCEPTIONS
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Jonathan entered this competition with the hopes of receiving funds to bring his project to fruition. After registering, Jonathan was informed that he was selected as a finalist for the grand prize along with two other teams, one from Temple University Beasley School of Law and the other from Fordham University School of Law. Jonathan traveled to Dana Point, Calif., where he gave a two-minute presentation about the website in front of 200 members of the American Bar Association’s Section of Litigation. Following an interview in California, the competition committee selected Jonathan as the grand prize winner, creating the opportunity for him to expand his website and pursue his career focus in special education. Further information regarding his website, The Student Advocate, can be found at www.thestudentadvocate.com.

In October, the Student Bar Association hosted the 13th Annual Katie Westbrook Race Ipsa Loquitur 5k Walk & Run. The annual race is dedicated to the memory of Katie Westbrook, who, at the age of 13, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer. Even from a very young age, Katie dreamed of one day becoming a lawyer. After her diagnosis, she contacted faculty members at Duquesne with the hopes of making her dream a reality. On June 3, 2001, just hours before Katie was to receive an honorary degree, she lost her battle with cancer at the age of 15. Katie touched the hearts of all privileged enough to meet her and showed how truly brave a young girl could be.

Devlin Fisher, president of the Student Bar Association, noted that the Katie Westbrook race is “one of the most important events” the Student Bar Association is involved in with respect to “directly benefiting law students.” All proceeds are donated to the SBA Centennial Endowed Fund, with the goal of providing awards for law students who demonstrate the same “courage, charisma, and compassion” as Katie for the law profession. More information is available through the Student Bar Association’s web page, www.duq.edu/sba.

“You might not know this now, but you are making Pittsburgh history!” was the introductory welcome by Audrey J. Murrell, director of the David Berg Center for Ethics and Leadership at the University of Pittsburgh School of Business and host of “The Great Case Competition.” Modeled after the popular TV series “The Amazing Race,” the competition was open to law, business and public policy students from seven schools. Contestants answered complex ethical fact patterns and raced to different locations between the University of Pittsburgh’s law and business schools to submit their answers. Four of our third-year students beat 56 other contestants to the final challenge. In the final round, Team “The Dukes” (Joseph D’Amico and Mark Troyan) and “Team G&K” (Gabriela Steier and Kiran K. Patel) had 15 minutes to create a PowerPoint presentation and five minutes to present their take on ethical violations by the Lennar Corporation to an audience of professionals in the finance industry.

Kiran K. Patel told Juris that “Professor Ron Ricci encouraged us to participate,” and his team-partner Gabriela Steier continued, “and we wanted to make him proud.” Ricci, professor of law at the Duquesne University School of Law, was happy to see four of his students as finalists. The Dukes won the second prize ($1,500) and Team G&K the third prize ($500). Bravo!

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story District Attorney Mike Nifong said to be true, despite the glaring holes in the case. She even berated a guest’s suggestion that the evidence was flimsy and created reasonable doubt as something out of Nazi Germany. However, when the charges were eventually dropped and the story was proven false, a substitute host aired that news. Grace has never mentioned the case again.

Even so, no story has received more play on Grace’s show than that of Casey Anthony. For three years, Grace provided endless commentary on the guilt of the woman she proclaimed “Tot Mom.” And for those who would doubt the impact of that coverage on the American public, the numbers speak for themselves. The ratings for HLN in the month of June, at the height of the trial, put the network in second place among cable news. It was the highest ratings in the history of the channel. They even made a serious prime-time challenge to Fox News, the No. 1 cable news network, in the coveted 25–54 age group. In contrast, HLN’s ratings just before the start of the trial in May were mired in a double-digit slump.

Defense attorneys have begun to take notice. Attorneys Nareg Gourjian and Edward Chernoff argued in Los Angeles Superior Court that the jury in the Dr. Conrad Murray trial should have been sequestered from the danger of sensationalized media coverage of the trial, singling out Grace’s “character assassination” during the Casey Anthony saga. In responding to the idea that her show would bias a jury, Grace stated, “I guess that makes us, umm … the good guys!” Those who believe in a fair criminal justice system, one where a defendant is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, might see things otherwise.

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Female TV Lawyers:
Ladies or Tramps?

By Gabriela Steier, Managing Associate Editor

In one word: Neither! They are only entertainers.

Female lawyers on TV are interesting because they are stylized and rehearsed exaggerations played by famous actresses, either as darling and ditsy, or sexy and sly caricatures of women. But no one would want to be represented in court by Elle Woods!

Society’s confidence in lawyers is known to be on a downward slope. Could it be based on a wrong impression people get from TV lawyers? To restore some of the confidence in the legal profession, I will debunk the top three female TV lawyer myths.
TV Myth # 1:

They are pretty, skinny ladies who win cases by turning heads. A little outdated but excellent example is Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart) in the fictional Boston law firm Cage and Fisch. The sexy attorney finds herself distressed about love and dating during work breaks in the firm’s restroom. But, did she ever really work on the show? Compare the new twist on female lawyer caricatures in the show “Drop Dead Diva” starring Jane (Brooke Elliott), a ditsy model in the body of a chubby lawyer. Jane is not a gorgeous vamp, but she is still consumed by love and dating. Like Ally McBeal, she is never really working on the show either. But the truth is, female lawyers must balance their private lives and work a whole lot! They invest many hours of research into the one moment-to-shine in court. Or better, many long days of transactional work and intense strategic planning pass for every moment they spend in court — if any — and we do not see that preparation on TV.

TV Myth # 2:

Female law professors are mean snobs. Picture Professor Stromwell (Holland Taylor) at Harvard Law School, challenging Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) during a socratic lecture in “Legally Blonde.” In reality, female law professors are not those upright elderly ladies with pearl chokers we see on TV. They are experienced, highly educated women of strong character. Our own Rona Kaufman Kitchen, assistant professor at Duquesne University School of Law, is a true role model for her students — a brilliant, accomplished and elegant lady with high professional standards. She told *Juris* that “there is not enough diversity on TV, so female lawyers quickly become caricatures.” Professor Kitchen illustrated the flip side of the ditsy sexy lawyer on TV with Carly Fiorini, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard. To this day, casebooks portray Fiorini as a “sly, powerful bitch,” which, according to Professor Kitchen, is a common but incorrect TV myth of female lawyers. “Diversity eliminates caricatures,” suggests Professor Kitchen. We hope that TV producers will listen to her carefully.

TV Myth # 3:

Female judges are indecisive scatterbrains. Think of actress Sherri Shepherd as the all but impartial female judge on “Hot in Cleveland,” with a crush on a hot dimwitted male defense attorney. Contrast her to Amy Brenneman, the family court judge in “Judging Amy,” a divorced, heartbroken mother who still lives at home. Those believable TV judges make half-hazardous rulings in family court, while they cannot align their own private dramas. It is nothing but natural then that TV viewers lose faith in the justice system. From my own experience as an intern for a female judge of the Pennsylvania Superior Court in Pittsburgh, I know they are admirable working mothers, who master the art of balancing career with family life.

As Professor Kitchen pointed out, the glass ceiling and maternal wall theories hold true, and yet we begin to see characterizations of women overcoming those hurdles. There is more to a female lawyer than a girly pushover or a ruthless careerist. One of the few TV lawyers who teaches us differently is the darling and elegant mother of five, Clair Olivia Hanks-Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad) on “The Cosby Show,” and even Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) on “Sex and City,” stepping up against sexist male colleagues. Let us hope that new generations of female TV lawyers will reveal increasingly competent and reliable role models of strong character, who can restore the viewers’ faith in our profession.

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