

## Thanks a Million

Written by Garry Lee Wright  
Wednesday, 25 October 2000 18:00

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“Boss, we’re getting sued.” “Sued? Who’d sue ABC?” “It’s in the papers. Listen to this. ‘A federal judge will rule shortly on whether the hit television program Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? discriminates against the hearing-impaired and those who can’t use touch-tone telephones. ’”

“Whaaat?? What are they talking about?”

“They’re suing us and the production company, saying the way we screen contestants violates the Americans with Disabilities Act.”

“Get them on the phone! And get Mason Perry from the legal department to come in. And Skip Kovacs from programming, too.”

“Already here, chief. With another idea for a high-concept show that’s got a wrestling tie-in.”

“Not now! We’re being sued by lawyers for the hearing-impaired.”

“We are? What’s going on?”

“Sue? Sue? Did someone say sue?”

“That’s right, counselor, come in. We have a serious situation here. This might be the network’s biggest black eye since Supertrain.”

“Excuse me, everyone. There’s a Mr. Smith on the phone. He’s the hearing-impaired lawyer. I mean, you know, the lawyer for the hearing-impaired. I mean — ”

“All right, all right. Put him through. Hello, Smith? Listen up — I mean, now hear this — I mean — now look, we’ve done our darnedest for diversity on this show. Everybody knows how hard we’ve tried to be fair. We even had Regis tell white guys to stop calling so much.”

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“Close, but no cigar. My clients watch the show closed-captioned, but they can’t even hear the questions to try out. That means they don’t get on national TV like everybody else. Not to mention the chance to win a million bucks for knowing Nixon was on Laugh-In.”

“How can we please everybody?”

“Speaking as ABC’s attorney, we dispute the notion that prospective game-show contestants with disabilities should be treated as a protected class.”

“Big deal. I’m also representing the Outraged Citizens with Rotary Telephones, you techno-bully.”

“Listen, Smith, can’t we work something out? How about tickets to the show for each of your plaintiffs, and we throw in some of those spiffy monochromatic outfits Regis wears? What do you say?”

“No dice. We’re suing.”

“Folks, if I could just break in. Skip Kovacs, network programming. To be perfectly honest, our ratings are finally starting to go south, and the last thing we need right now is a lot of bad publicity. How about we cook up a special segment — like one of those celebrity weeks — with some of your clients. We could even call it *Who Wants to Be a Hearing-Impaired Millionaire?* Those folks can all lip read, right?”

“Just a minute. As the network’s legal counsel, I’m very concerned about this kind of precedent. What’s to prevent some bozo who blows the \$100 question from coming back to us and claiming that being stupid is a disability?”

“If being stupid were a disability, half your viewers would have a class action going. Now, all we want is a chance to compete. Yes or no?”

“But how will the hearing-impaired folks talk back to Regis?”

“How about sign language?”

“Sign language? Regis barely knows the English language.”

“Besides that, how could we handle the ‘phone-a-friend’?”

“Well, the hearing-impaired contestant could communicate in sign language to a second person who would then type the question and e-mail it to the friend being consulted, who would then e-mail back a response, which would be re-translated into sign language — unless, of course, the friend in question is visually impaired, in which case the question could be converted via voice-dictation software, and — ”

“People! Can’t we just compromise on this? Tell you what, when the camera goes to

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somebody's spouse in the audience, they just hold up a sign that says, 'Hi, Regis! I didn't hear the question, but I love New York!'"

"Forget it. We're suing."

"Wait — I've got an idea. We do a whole show without sound. It'll be ground-breaking television."

"Excuse me, everyone. Bad news. I just heard that *Millionaire* is being canceled."

"Canceled? No!"

"That's the word. They're giving our time slot to some new show called *20/20 with Ralph Nader*."

"This is all moot, then."

"Not on your life. And we may even want punitive damages."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Not necessarily. How about Marlee Matlin co-hosting the final week?"

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