

NAAFA Newsletter

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NEWS AND COMMENT

OUT OF COURT SETTLEMENT MADE IN HEALTH SPA LAWSUIT

NAAFA MEMBER IRA SPRINTZEN SETTLES WITH JACK LALANNE

According to Ira Sprintzen, "the most important thing to come out of my settlement with the spa (the Jack LaLanne Health Spa chain) is not any monetary reward I am receiving. By pursuing my lawsuit against them, I've accomplished something on behalf of other 'overweight' or handicapped people; I've set the record straight that the things that happened to me shouldn't happen to others..." The amount of the settlement is not disclosed, but is "agreeable", according to Sprintzen. He would have preferred a court decision in his favor, to the out-of-court settlement to which all parties finally agreed. However, such a decision might well have taken another year or more, Sprintzen said.

As reported in this **Newsletter** in the 12/85 and 3/86 issues, the case involved Ira Sprintzen's membership in the Jack LaLanne Health Spa in Westchester County, NY. Sprintzen filed a claim with the New York State Human Rights Administration, saying that at first, the spa accepted his life membership, but then the manager and assistant manager insisted on refunding the payment, and refused him further admittance to the spa, claiming that 30 regular members complained that he was too fat, and that they would resign their memberships if he were allowed to remain. At the time this occurred, Sprintzen weighed 640 pounds, although he now weighs around 280.

Sprintzen, who had undergone gastric bypass surgery immediately prior to his application to LaLanne, had been advised by his physician to begin an exercise program, especially including swimming, and the LaLanne facility had been the best one near his home to offer such a program. At the hearing before a judge prior to the settlement, Sprintzen's doctor, Peter Wilk, M.D., testified that because of the lack of prescribed exercise, a second surgery had to be postponed.

According to Ira Sprintzen, after publicity about his case first appeared, he received several invitations to join other spas. But he now receives his exercise by going to the Mid-Westchester YMHA-YWHA, which has a pool and welcomed him as a member!

COMMENTARY

The Sprintzen case, which received attention in the newspapers and other media, has put all health and exercise salons on notice that they may face a lawsuit if they decide, on seemingly esthetic grounds, not to admit those whose offense is that they don't look like the "beautiful" people that the spas are mainly interested in attracting.

Why would a health spa care what a paying customer looks like, if their purpose is to provide facilities to help people live healthier lives through exercise? The answer is obvious: The true purpose of many health spas and exercise salons is to cater profitably to those who wish a socially acceptable place to "hang out." In many cases, such spas serve exactly the same function as "singles" bars, with an additional advantage: Patrons can see what others look like when they are wearing a minimum of clothing while professing an interest in physical fitness.

Some spas may not emphasize the singles aspect, but many of their clients, both single and married, are so immersed in the physical fitness culture and the prevailing think-thin climate, that they are repelled by the sight of anybody who is more than "pleasingly plump."

So one kind of establishment caters to the "singles" crowd; the other kind to the "fitness" crowd; and some cater to both. For someone weighing 640 pounds to walk in asking for membership, ready, willing and able to wear a bathing suit is not unlike a black man applying to join a white country club. Of course, private clubs don't usually advertise publicly for members...but health spas and fitness salons do advertise to the public!

Although the Sprintzen case should make things easier for those who wish to join spas but who might otherwise be turned away, some fat people are happier in their own swimming and exercise program. Some chapters of NAAFA have started such programs, as have other groups in the size acceptance movement. What can an individual do who does not live near such a group? Sprintzen ended up getting satisfactory results at a "Y" near him. Such organizations, usually sponsored by Christian or Hebrew associations, rarely charge commercial prices for membership, and do not require that members be of any special religion. Some facilities, originally built for use by the handicapped, are also ideal for use by very big people. Use of a pool is often recommended exercise for people of all sizes, with the naturally buoyancy of the water making many exercises possible for people who have difficulty performing them on land.

We feel that fitness is a good goal regardless of size--and we applaud Ira Sprintzen for his efforts not just in his own behalf, but for fat and handicapped people everywhere.

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MEDIA AND PUBLICITY WATCH - Large size fashions were given the spotlight on July 13 in the Atlanta Constitution in the High Style section. The article, titled "Big is Beautiful", mentioned no fewer than 13 stores or chains in the Atlanta area that now carry large sizes for women. Also mentioned were two mail order companies, Linda Martin Designs and Sweeter Measures (both of which are run by NAAFA members and advertise in our own Ad Supplement.) Most stores had upper size limitations, but Linda Martin Designs was quoted as saying that "we go as large as God made people..."

Speaking of large sizes, Vogue Magazine, having created some waves by publishing its large-size supplement in March, has added large sizes to its Pattern Book for July/August.

A supportive article titled "Born-Again Fatties Gather with Pride" written about a dance held by the Philadelphia area chapter of NAAFA in Willow Grove, PA has been syndicated by the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, appearing in several newspapers recently.

Excellent coverage was received on July 7 on the TV show Kelley & Co., in Detroit, MI. NAAFA members June Bailey (OH) and Jim Brown and Mary-Jane Grace (NJ) are said to have received excellent treatment at the hands of the hosts, John Kelley and his wife Marilyn, whose questions showed unusual sensitivity to the topic. Thoughts of adding Michigan representatives to the panel were abandoned by the show when it decided that three guests would be enough to fill the allotted time.

A letter from Donna Marie Ryan (IL) to the Chicago Sun-Times brought results. Donna complained to the "Action Times" section of the paper about being victimized by an Herbalife salesman. Seems she had tried the stuff, it made her ill, and she couldn't get a refund. The paper was able to get Herbalife to agree to a refund; interestingly, after publishing Donna's letter in which she displayed positive feelings as a fat person, Action Times advised her, in part, as follows: "In the past, we've always cautioned people about faddish diets...with your own body description and attitude in mind, perhaps a popular saying might help you the next time you're lured by a flashy diet ad: If it ain't broke, why fix it?" (Sun-Times, July 1).

NAAFA members Russell and Peggy Williams (MD) appeared on a Hagerstown radio program on May 29, speaking about NAAFA and the problems facing fat people in today's society.

Phillip Morris is sponsoring a travelling photo exhibit on the subject of job discrimination, and NAAFA has provided information for the inclusion of size discrimination in the exhibit.

The PBS television series Bodywatch, aired in March and April, which included one fairly progressive show on weight control (see Newsletter, April, 1986) will rerun the entire series in many cities over the months ahead. Watch local listings for the series, which is sponsored by the folks at Nutra-sweet.(!)

The National Enquirer is at it again. Their latest "fun contest" is to determine who has the "Biggest Belly in America"--although they seem to assume that the winner will be a man...

OTHER MEDIA ITEMS - The way the media is carrying on about the size 12-14 figure of Sarah Ferguson, the new Duchess of York in England, you'd almost think she is fat. Actually, her alleged 41" hips would make many an American girl despair of ever being fashionable in our anti-fat society. But not to worry! Even though some headlines refer to her as Prince Andrew's "Bulging Bride-to-Be", royal sources are quoted by some papers as saying that "Andrew is very much in love with Fergie, as he himself puts it, "every sexy and sensational ounce of her!" Fortunately, Fergie insists that she doesn't have a problem! If she ever says otherwise, we will invite her to a NAAFA event, and she will be better able to put her size in better perspective...

Now that Fergie has married, and become the Duchess of York, the press hasn't let up. One English "newspaper" actually suggested that the reason that no kitchen appliances were among the wedding presents for the first time in royal history, is that guests did not want to give Fergie anything to encourage eating...

One columnist, Liz Smith, told off the Fergie diet-mongers on July 25: "May I say a word about the new Duchess of York? I hope this beautiful young woman will stick to her guns and not go berserk dieting. It's appalling all the mean-spirited criticism and comment to which this vibrant English rose has been subjected. I don't understand why so many people want to deny all that is attractive and natural in the female form. Sarah's "career" doesn't depend on her having a svelte stick figure. She is not an actress or a model. I'd like to see Sarah have her cake and eat it, rather than see her driven to anorexia, fainting at polo matches, and worrying about the calories in a lettuce leaf."

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ACTIVISM COMMITTEE REPORT - by Co-Chairpersons Williams and Wolfe

Members of NAAFA, this time of year is an important time to talk to politicians about your rights. Since NAAFA, Inc. is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, you must never say or imply that NAAFA endorses a political candidate or platform. However, NAAFA does try to educate the public about the special needs of fat people, and as citizens you have the full right to find out where candidates for public office stand on issues that effect you.

From now until November, all across America, there will be tens of thousands of politicians running for public office at local, state, and federal levels. These political candidates will be attending hundreds of thousands of public meetings where the audience will be able to question them. Go to as many meetings as possible and ask one simple question: "Do you believe that the most competent applicant for each position should be hired or do you favor hiring the best out of the applicants who has a pleasing appearance?"

Should the candidate insist that the most competent applicants, regardless of looks, are being hired for government and government funded jobs, mention the shuttle disaster. Remind the candidate that there are many people who explained that, although they had responsibility for parts of the shuttle program, the disaster was not really their fault. Tell the candidate that you only remember these explanations being offered by thin, white, physically normal men, and that this suggests that either minorities (including the fat) are not being promoted into executive positions, or that minority executives are doing a much better job than are the thin white men in the shuttle program.

(Editors note: The Activism Committee has a good idea. Even if the candidate doesn't come around to your point of view, at least his/her consciousness has been raised to the fact that this is an issue with some of the voters. A second benefit is that a room full of people have been educated to the fact that fat people are denied access to jobs or promotions just because of their appearance and that at least some of them do not like or accept such treatment!)

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR...

The Editor's been getting lots of mail lately. Some of those letters will be included in upcoming **Newsletters**. There is one question that we would like to answer in this issue.

Carol Kaser (CA) asks why it takes almost a year to produce a convention special. Good question, and timely, too, in light of the fact that most members will have just received the 1985 coverage.

Amateur photo coverage of an event is chancy. Some years we have lots of great photos; other years are like 1985, when we had several photographic "disasters". Many thanks to Doug Zimmer (WA), Barbara Novack (MD), and an anonymous donor or two who answered our pleas in the advertising supplement and "saved the day". But it is important to note that when the Board voted for monthly Newsletters, it was with the understanding that funds would be diverted away from printing photographs (which is very expensive) to cover the extra expense of the monthly format. In June, however, the Board voted to have the photo coverage of the 1985 convention.

In the future there will probably not be "convention specials". Now that the **Newsletter** does not regularly carry photos, many events such as Holiday Happenings, chapter regional events, and NAAFA marriages are not receiving photo coverage. Therefore, it is our goal to produce an annual Yearbook, to be available in the spring. More on that in our next issue...and how NAAFA members can help make the Yearbook a reality.

NAAFA received a copy of Fat Chance from its publisher (Independent Hill Press, Alexandria, Va.). NAAFA often receives books and promotional materials about products that someone wants us to push to our members. Most of the time the books or products turn out to be diet-related--like the time the Herbalife distributor wanted to set up a booth at the convention. I picked up Fat Chance warily.

The cover and the table of contents were promising, but in the third paragraph of the introduction, Mr. Gossett announces he has lost 25 pounds. "Oh no! Here we go," I thought.

But what followed was wonderful: a witty, interesting, easy-to-read, easy-to-follow synopsis of what the size-acceptance movement is all about. I had to finish the book before I could put it down.

Later I learned an interesting fact about Fat Chance. Mr. Gossett had never heard of NAAFA until after the book was published. In fact, Mr. Gossett didn't even know there was a "movement" out there until we told him so. He is just one of those very exceptional people who, like June Bailey (who wrote Fat Is Where It's At), figured it all out for himself!

Mr. Gossett, a former FBI agent, "figured it out" while suffering through his employer's "Weight Program". (He also humorously tells us of his tricks to live within their system--like the silk and balsa wood shoes that he wore to weigh-ins so he could weigh a few pounds less.)

First he explains in a very logical way why diets don't work and why years of yo-yo dieting can be dangerous. He discusses the weight charts:

"As a result of relying on the 'desirable weight' charts, we have created an imaginary disease called 'fat' (or 'obesity', if you are a doctor) which infects most of the population. Lucky for us too, because we would never know we were suffering from this disease if the 'desirable weight' charts didn't tell us we are sick..."

He discusses some of the crazy norms that exist in this world where everyone feels "too fat":
"Even thin people are tired about hearing about dieting. It is as disgusting as the habit people in the 18th century had of talking about their bowels all the time."

He talks about the pressures that fat people live with: The pressures from within, from family and from outside sources that make money off fat people's misery:

"The folks who sell life-style change programs capitalize on our guilt. Our guilt becomes their gelt. If guilt could cure obesity, there wouldn't be a fat person in the western world."

About eating and dieting:

"Eating, for example, should be a totally sensuous, joyous satisfying experience. Trying to make each meal an adventure is loads of fun. Dieting, like bad service in a restaurant, turns one of life's greatest pleasures into totally unsatisfying suffering."

But I think what I liked best about Fat Chance is that it is a very positive, hopeful book. The author encourages the readers to take control of their own lives and even gives some meaningful suggestions for finding and recognizing happiness at any size.

This book is recommended reading for anyone in the movement, and as Chairman Fabrey said as he finished reading it, "...Gossett's book is an inspiration...it made me laugh, it made me think, and it made me grateful that this man was willing to share his insights with us..."

Editors Note: Harry Gossett has been scheduled to speak at the national convention on Saturday, August 23rd at the Awards Brunch.

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To all the NAAFA members who continue to send us news clippings
and articles regarding fat issues... THANK YOU!!!

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