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Slander suit costs radio ex-host, KJFK \$455,000

On-air personality also invaded privacy of Pflugerville woman, jury finds

By Keith Paul

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Austin radio station KJFK bills itself as “The First Amendment at its best. Talk with an attitude.” Some of that talk cost the station and one of its former on-air personalities \$455,000 this week. A Travis County District Court jury, in an 11-1 decision Thursday, found that Bill Simonson slandered Debby Wilie and invaded her privacy on his program, known as “The Huge Show,” on KJFK (98.9 FM) in September and October 1997.

He and the station were accused of falsely broadcasting that Wilie, 46, of Pflugerville, exposed her breasts during her birthday party at her home and performed “table dances” and “lap dances,” according to court documents.

“A lot of my friends heard it, and it was all untrue,” Wilie said Friday. “It was humiliating. I’ve taught Sunday school. I’ve never behaved in that manner. This proves that it was wrong and it was untrue and it should have never been said.”

Wilie was listening to Simonson’s show and heard some of the things that were being said about her. Her name was never used on the air in connection with those actions – she was referred to as “D” or “Queen D” or “D of the Jungle” – said David Dunham, her lawyer. But Wilie said Simonson’s listeners knew who she was. Steve Frasier, who worked on Simonson’s show, was renting a room from her, and her name had been mentioned on the show as Frasier’s landlady.

Wilie said that sometime after Frasier moved in, he made romantic overtures that she rebuffed. Frasier and Wilie’s other tenant were invited to the party.

“He was there. He knew it wasn’t true,” Wilie said.

When she confronted him about what was said on the radio, Frasier replied that he had done it because it was “good radio,” according to court documents filed by Dunham.

He said Wilie wanted to sue Frasier as well, but he no longer worked at the station and couldn’t be found.

Simonson, who now works for a Chicago radio station, declined to comment Friday, referring all questions to KJFK, where he worked for about two years. KJFK officials did not return several calls Friday. The station is owned by Times-Shamrock broadcast group.

KJFK bills itself as targeting adult males from 18 to 44 and says it's marketed "with a rock format mentality, having an aggressive style combined with a highly researched, professional presentation of its product," according to a mission statement on the station's Web site.

KJFK's attorney, John Beliveau, declined to comment.

Wilie, who works for a state agency in Austin, said she was humiliated and feared that she would be fired because of the allegations.

Dunham said she was teased after the broadcasts.

"She went to work, and people started asking her, 'When are you going to start working at Sugar's?'" he said. "This wasn't trash radio about Michael Jordan or someone in the public eye. They were picking on a private citizen."

Dunham said he wanted to put "trash radio" on trial and enlisted the help of Robert Jensen, a University of Texas associate professor of journalism who teaches media law and ethics.

"They had not only crossed a line but went so far over the line," said Jensen, who testified at the trial and was a paid consultant on the case. "I thought the injustice was so clear and the need to be remedied so obvious."