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POP TARTS

Is Learning Channel's 'Little People' Franchise 21st Century Exploitation of Dwarfism?

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In 2006 The Learning Channel introduced the Roloff family in the docu-reality series “Little People, Big World,” now in its fifth season, which showcases the pressure of life with dwarfism and the financial burdens of operating their own business.

Last year the network brought out “The Little Couple” which follows four feet tall newlywed couple through the struggles of life and love in an average-sized world.

Then just a few weeks ago TLC picked up where the popular specials “Little Parents, First Baby” and “Little People, Big Pregnancy” left off, and debuted the series “Our Little Life” about little couple, Craig and Becky Hennon, and their normal-sized baby.

But they weren't done!

Now the network is ready to launch yet another reality series entitled “The Little Chocolatiers.” This new branch in the ever-growing TLC tree of “little people” escapades brings to the little screen the sweet (and not so sweet) challenges

faced by little married couple, Steve and Katie Hatch, who run the Salt Lake City-based “Hatch Family Chocolates.” The episodes are set to feature everyday adventures such as the duo’s difficulties in building a life-sized chocolate desk complete with books, pencils and paper, as well as scoping out local bars to find the best bar food and chocolate pairings.

“Both the ‘Little Couple’ and the ‘Little Chocolatiers’ started as specials but got such big ratings with minimal promotion and press support. Viewers fell in love with the characters,” a rep from TLC said. . “These happen to be people who are little people that have extremely compelling stories.”

Despite the string of shows, however, the network denied that they are trying to create a “little people” franchise.

“I think it’s very easy to all of a sudden look at little people shows as a genre. We approach it more as individual stories, finding great characters with unique perspectives who are at the same time extremely relatable,” the rep said. “Part of the goal of these shows is to combat the ignorance. The show is a form of education.”

But is the fact that millions of Americans are tuning in each week to entertain themselves with shows centered around people of short stature just as disturbing as when people paid to see them in carnival shows that were outlawed decades ago?

“People think it is okay to watch (little people) from their living room, but it’s wrong to stare at them intensely in public or put them in a freak show. But in essence it’s the same thing and crossing the line into voyeurism,” theology and pop culture expert Mark Turner told Pop Tarts. “For example, my biggest problem with ‘The Little Couple’ is that it majors in the mundane. The producers spend time following the couple on benign vacations and birthday celebrations while failing to explain all of the triumphs and successes that had to occur for Jen to become an intensive care pediatrician! Essentially, this show follows very normal, intelligent, average people who happen to need a step stool to cook dinner.”

So how many little people shows does one network really need? Are little people being exploited in the ratings game?

“Once you get the idea of their disability the uniqueness of the show is gone, unless you get joy watching them struggle to fit in and do average-bodied tasks each week,” owner of Bowles Books Writing & Publishing, David W. Boles commented on his blog Celebrity Semiotic. “If you’ve watched the Rolloffs, then you pretty much know everything about Dwarfism there is to casually know.”

However, the Little People of America supports TLC’s little people programming slate.

“Little People of America encourages members of the organization and all members of the dwarfism community to pursue their interests and to seek out opportunity. With this mind, Little People of America supports all efforts that ensure people with disabilities have access to opportunities offered to the general population,” Gary Arnold, VP of Communications at the organization said. “We are pleased that reality programming on The Learning Channel portrays people with dwarfism pursuing a wide variety of professions, from doctor to business person to candy maker. We hope that such programming empowers others with dwarfism to pursue their interests and that such programming sends a message to the general public that dwarfism, something we take pride in, is just one component of who we are.”

It isn’t just TLC that seems to be fixated by dwarfism. There are other shows such as Animal Planet’s “Pit Bull” starring little people running a dog-rescue business, numerous ads like the one for [Dr. Pepper](#) that features a “mini-Kiss” band performing alongside the real Kiss band, the Micro Wrestling Federation’s self-titled midget wrestlers, and Vegas showman Jeff Beacher’s traveling “Mad House” show starring “mini” celebrities.

And while Beacher’s show is made up of a string of variety acts, (surprise surprise) it is his “little guys” that are the central attraction.

“People love them the most, the girls are screaming and everyone goes crazy when they come out,” Beacher said. “My guys are like wild and crazy rock stars.”

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