



WORLD NEWS

Oprah Winfrey And Hearst Plan New Women's Magazine

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Television talk show hostess and media mogul Oprah Winfrey is venturing into the publishing world with plans for a women's monthly magazine she and her partner, Hearst Magazines, expect to launch in March 2000. Offi-

cial at Hearst said they had not yet named the magazine, but stressed that Oprah's name would be featured in the title to capitalize on her celebrity. It will examine various themes, including work, health, books, family, fashion and spirituality.

Killer Rains Swamp Las Vegas

Two Dead After Worst Flooding in 15 Years

By ANGIE WAGNER

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LAS VEGAS (July 9) - A powerful summer storm transformed this simmering desert city into a raging river that swamped hundreds of cars, smashed mobile homes and killed at least two people.

"It's a wide strip of devastation," Gov. Kenny Guinn said after taking a helicopter tour of flooded areas Thursday evening, when the water finally started to recede.

Las Vegas isn't used to this kind of downpour, with 3 inches falling in just a few hours Thursday. The Las Vegas area usually receives slightly more than 4 inches in an entire year.

Ron McQueen, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said it was the city's worst flooding in 15 years: Water turned parts of Interstate 15 into a lake, most intersections were under water much of the day and firefighters rescued stranded motorists from their waterlogged cars.

"It was picking up cars and throwing them around like toothpicks," said Robert Anderson, who watched as his neighbor's mobile home was

swept away. "It was a huge double-wide and it just went into the water and it just disintegrated."

Clark County Fire Department spokesman Steve La-Sky said hundreds of cars were trapped in high water and at least three mobile homes had been lost.

The rain appeared to have led to the deaths of two people, a man whose body was found in a flood channel and a woman who died in a traffic accident, officials said.

Tourists sought shelter in the casinos along the famed Strip.

"The Strip is a lake, up over the curbs, into our fountains," said Phil Cooper, spokesman for Caesars Palace hotel-casino.

Part of the casino was closed. Flights at McCarran International Airport were shut down for 45 minutes, and two planes were diverted to Los Angeles, airport spokeswoman Cynthia Markson said.

"It's a nightmare. It's one of the worst things I've ever seen," said Nevada Highway Patrol spokesman Scott Flabi.

Gilles Bloch, a tourist from France who watched the flooding from his

Despite Economic Boom, the Middle Class Is Still Troubled by Bills

49 Million Had Trouble Meeting Basic Needs at Least Once in 1995

By LAURA MECKLER

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WASHINGTON - Luanne Shirling didn't think of herself as someone on the financial edge. She and her husband had good jobs and not much debt and were starting to fix up their house.

But she didn't have health insurance, and she unexpectedly became pregnant. She ended up with complications, a Caesarean section and \$20,000 in medical bills. Before long, she had missed several mortgage payments and even had to use food stamps for a short while.

She's not alone. Some 49 million Americans - or 20 percent of the nation - had trouble meeting basic needs at least once in 1995. That includes paying rent, mortgages, food and utility bills.

The poorest, of course, were most likely to have trouble. But many, like the Shirings, are solidly middle class. And 8.1 million were in families earning more than \$45,700 a year, the Census Bureau said in a report being released today.

"We were not really saving when all of a sudden - bam! - this hit," said Mrs. Shirling, of Warrenton, Va., whose family income was about \$35,000 - putting them near the national average. "I think a lot of people out there think they're getting by and doing fine and don't realize how devastating it can be."

Nationwide, about 19.5 million of those who had trouble meeting basic needs had household incomes in the bottom 20 percent of the nation, meaning less than \$16,800 per year. Another 12.2 million were below \$30,400.

But 5.2 million people had incomes above \$45,700, and another 2.9 million were above \$68,700 - in the wealthiest fifth of the nation.

Experts explain that many families with healthy incomes are still living close to the financial edge, without enough saved for an emergency. It's particularly dangerous for families living in expensive cities or carrying large mortgages or personal debt.

That makes them vulnerable to unexpected financial hits - a layoff or

large medical bill, for instance. Or divorce can often push a family into financial crisis, with the people who used to pay one rent or mortgage now forced to pay two.

The Census Bureau also asked Americans who would help them if they had trouble. More than three in four said they expected to get help if they needed it, mostly from family and friends.

But only 17 percent of those who ran into trouble actually got help, mostly from family but also from government.

Part of the difference in who needs help may be family stability, said Census demographer Kurt J. Bauman, who wrote the report. He noted that the elderly, who often live near the poverty line, were the age group least likely to report trouble meeting basic needs. But the elderly generally have fixed incomes and stable expenses.

The most vulnerable group was children, who are also the poorest Americans. Nearly 30 percent of children lived in a family that had trouble

meeting basic needs. Blacks and Hispanics were more likely to report trouble than whites, as were female-headed families - all groups that are more likely to be poor, as well.

But the report's more surprising findings dealt with those who are not poor, but firmly in the middle class or above.

The problem is that many of these families do not save enough money, said Joanne Kerstetter, president of the Consumer Credit Counseling Service, which helps consumers restructure their debt.

"They haven't been taught how to handle their finances. When any type of crisis hits, they don't have savings to fall back on," she said.

An estimated 55 percent to 60 percent of households carry some credit card debt, said Stephen Brobeck, executive director of the Consumer Federation of America. Interest payments and fees quickly add up.

"Even small differences can determine whether a lifestyle is sustainable or not," he said. "Eventually it catches up with them."

Connecticut OKs Witness Protection Bill

By DIANE SCARPONI

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HARTFORD (AP) - Connecticut's governor has signed into law a witness protection program named for an 8-year-old boy who was shot to death to keep him from testifying in a murder case.

Lawmakers and law enforcement officials said the legislation creates the most comprehensive state-run witness protection program in the country.

"An attack on a witness is an attack on our judicial system," Gov. John G. Rowland said Thursday. "Our citizens must have confidence that our systems work and that they're protected."

Lawmakers were galvanized into coming up with a better way to protect

witnesses, especially children, after the shooting deaths last January of Leroy "B.J." Brown and his mother, Karen Clarke, in their Bridgeport home.

Russell Peeler and his brother, Adrian, are charged with murdering mother and son as the boy screamed, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" The boy was going to testify against Russell Peeler in a drive-by killing case.

Bridgeport police said they had provided special protection for the family, but Ms. Clarke had asked them to discontinue the patrols outside her house because she found them intrusive.

The new law allows the state to take custody of child witnesses if their parents fail to take steps to protect them.

It also creates the "Leroy Brown and Karen Clarke Witness Protection Program." The new program requires the chief state's attorney to offer protection to witnesses if they want it and inform them of their rights.

It also stiffens the penalty for intimidating a witness and sets up a toll-free hot line that witnesses can call if they need help.

Leroy's uncle said the boy and his mother would not have been killed if the new system had been in place.

"It's unfortunate that Karen and B.J. had to be martyrs in order for this to take place," said Oswald Clarke, who flew to Connecticut from his home in Florida for the bill-signing.

Jury Awards Family \$4.9B Against GM

By MICHAEL WHITE

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LOS ANGELES (AP) - A 1973 study that coldly calculated the cost to General Motors of settling claims for fatal crashes was key to a jury that awarded the largest product liability verdict in U.S. history - \$4.9 billion to six people badly burned in a collision.

"We figured that if they had no regard for the lives of people in their cars, they should be held liable for it," jury foreman Coleman Thornton said after Friday's verdict.

The jury awarded Patricia Anderson, her four children and family friend Jo Tigner \$107 million in compensatory damages and \$4.8 billion in punitive damages for injuries they suffered when their Chevrolet Malibu exploded in flames when it was rear-ended in 1993.

GM spokesman Terry Rhadigan said the verdict will be appealed, and legal experts predicted it will be overturned.

"This crash was not GM's fault and we are disappointed the conduct of this trial did not let the jury fairly evaluate the claims," Rhadigan said.

The verdict came after a 10-week state court trial focusing on internal GM documents about fuel tanks in its various models.

Although the documents do not specifically mention the 1979 Malibu driven by the plaintiffs, their lawyers said GM knew for years its gas tanks were unsafe.

Rather than pay for a recall, they argued, GM found it cheaper to settle lawsuits.

"GM had numerous failures in their crash tests, but chose to leave the tank where it was because changing it would have cost \$8.59" per car, said Brian Panish, lead attorney in the case.

In the 1973 study, part of a general analysis of gas tank safety, GM design engineer E.C. Ivey - who testified at the trial - estimated it would cost the company \$200,000 to settle legal claims from each fire-involved fatality, or about \$2.40 for each GM vehicle on the road.

"Obviously Ivey is not an individual whom we would ever, in any conceivable situation, want to be identified to the plaintiffs in (an accident) case," said a 1981 Oldsmobile memo introduced as evidence along with the study. "The documents he generated are undoubtedly some of the potentially most harmful and most damaging were they ever to be produced."

Jurors concluded GM knew it should have made its gas tanks safer.

"From the beginning I was surprised

that Mr. Ivey was evasive of the questions the plaintiffs asked. He was quite cooperative with the defense. That got me to wondering," Thornton said.

Rhadigan said the accident's severity wasn't the fault of the Malibu's fuel system, but of a drunken driver who plowed into the vehicle at a red light.

Plaintiffs argued the gas tank was too close to the rear bumper and better designs would have placed it over the axle or incorporated a shield.

Thornton said the panel calculated its award based on the amount GM spent advertising cars with similar gasoline tanks.

Tom Harrison, publisher of Lawyers Weekly USA, said the enormous punitive portion of the award is unlikely to stand on appeal.

"They're sending a message," he said of the jurors. "They're mad."

Walter Olson, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, was critical of juries that seek to punish companies with verdicts that threaten their financial stability.

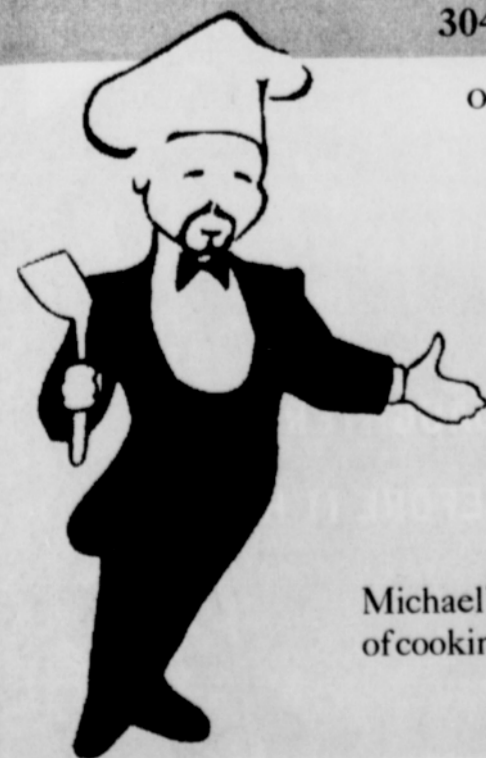
"The idea is, 'How shameful for an American manufacturer who would build a car that could not withstand being hit from behind at 70 mph,'" he said. "There is a word for that kind of car: a tank."

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