

Rockville sued for frightening a 7-year-old

By Glen R. Justice
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A Rockville couple, claiming their 7-year-old daughter suffered severe psychological trauma from the showing of the horror movie "Poltergeist" during the city's after-school program, have filed a \$1.4 million lawsuit against the city.

The movie deals with satanic

weekly professional therapy for nightmares, sleeplessness and a fear of being alone.

The suit charges the city with negligence, infliction of emotional distress and breach of contract.

The movie carries a PG-13 rating by the Motion Picture Association of America, meaning parental guidance is advised and that some of the material may be inappropriate for

children under 13.

It was shown without parents' knowledge to an audience of first-through sixth-graders at Fallsmead Elementary School in May of 1988 — a Friday the 13th — as part of the Student Total Enrichment Program.

The girl came home that evening severely distraught, according to the couple's attorney, Steven Van Grack. Since then, she has undergone

children under 13.

"The movie was shown on Friday the 13th," said Mr. Van Grack, a former mayor of Rockville. "It was clear that there was some kind of scary or supernatural concept going on. The city can't deny responsibility for the act; they can't deny the moral responsibility. It is far from an

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enriching experience to show that movie to a child."

"Poltergeist," a 1982 Steven Spielberg production, is the fictional account of a couple and their three children who move into a house built on top of a graveyard and inhabited by ghosts.

The movie is highlighted by a scene in which a young boy's worst fears come true. The boy is alone in his room at night when he is attacked by a menacing toy clown and dragged out the window by the branches of a tree that comes to life.

"I had a movie rated PG-13 on the other night and I turned it off because it was inappropriate for the children," one Rockville parent said yesterday. "You have to watch them first. I don't think they (the city) should take the liberty to show movies to children below the age that the movies are recommended for."

"It's a scary movie," said Mr. Van Grack, who rented the film prior to the Jan. 13 filing. "It's Spielberg at his best. If you want to be scared, go see 'Poltergeist.' We sent a copy of the film to the city."

Mr. Van Grack said the girl, now in the third grade at Fallsmead, was unable to sleep after the screening and, even now, does so with the covers over her head. He added that a report issued last spring by the girl's doctor recommended that she stay in counseling for at least another two years.

"She has significant fears of being alone. Her parents' greatest concern is that she has fears of life in general," Mr. Van Grack said.

The movie was not the first time the girl had been frightened by program activities. Similar problems occurred following a Halloween storytelling production in 1986 that

prompted the couple to speak with program officials regarding the curriculum.

"There were extensive efforts to solve the problem without litigation. Their (the parents') first concern was to prevent things from happening in the future. They wanted a change in policy regarding movies and the bills for the medical treatment paid for," Mr. Van Grack said.

"The city didn't acknowledge their responsibility and the suit has now taken a public posture. The parents feel that there is a message being sent to those who care for our children. The movie is designated for parental consent; that should tell you something. Even if it doesn't, there is an obligation there."

Mr. Van Grack added that, since the suit, program officials have sent parents a list of scheduled movies. Only two carried PG-13 ratings.

Neither the after-school program director, Betsy Thompson, nor City Attorney Paul Glasgow was available for comment.

Jennifer Thayden and Steve Chriqui, who supervised the children on the day of the showing and are named as defendants in the suit, also could not be reached yesterday.

Reactions to the suit varied in the Rockville academic community.

"First grade is probably a little young for that type of movie," said Caprice Chappas, co-chairman of the local PTA, adding that the after-school program is a good program, especially for families in which both parents work. "It was an unfortunate thing that happened. I don't know what's going to happen, but the city provides a good service that the community is in need of."

Fallsmead Principal Jeffrey Pitt said while the film is not approved to be shown as part of the regular school curriculum, some students might not have a problem viewing such a movie.

EDITORIALS

Scaring our children

The parents of a young girl are suing the city for psychological damage suffered by their daughter after she was shown the horror movie "Poltergeist" at the city's after-school program at Fallsmeade Elementary.

Our first reaction was to wonder what in blazes could the people running this program have been thinking when they decided to show this violent and terrifying movie to young children? The girl was 7 at the time of the incident in May 1988, far too young for this kind of fare.

We remind readers that this was not some flaky babysitter, nor some fly-by-night day care center which pulled this stunt. This was the city's generally well-regarded Student Total Enrichment Program, so popular it is usually filled to capacity.

So what was going on?

The parents say in the suit that they had previously asked that their daughter not be present when any scary programs were given, after

she reacted strongly to a Halloween story. And yet someone decided to show these children a horror movie, which is rated PG-13. The rating means the film board suggested parental guidance, and notes the movie is suitable for children over the age of 13.

Steven Van Grack, the attorney for the parents, said he deeply regretted filing the lawsuit against the city, but said city representatives have refused to accept responsibility for the incident. "We feel there is a clear responsibility," said Mr. Van Grack, the former mayor of the city.

We completely agree. The Mayor and Council should ask for a full accounting of how this program is being run, and should act quickly to set up strict guidelines about the kind of materials used.

There can be no excuse for showing this kind of movie to a group of children entrusted to the city for its care.