

The Real Trials of a ‘Real Housewife’

Erika Girardi is famous for her lavish lifestyle. Now her husband’s law firm has been accused of misappropriating millions of dollars. It’s all unfolding on TV.

By Matthew Goldstein and Katherine Rosman

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From a bit part as a dead body on “Law & Order” to six seasons on “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,” television has been a crucial part of Erika Girardi’s careful cultivation of her branded glamorous life.

But now the reality show is offering a glimpse into the real-world legal drama surrounding Ms. Girardi, her renowned lawyer husband, and millions of dollars he’s accused of misappropriating from vulnerable clients — including burn victims and relatives of those killed in the 2018 Lion Air jet crash — to support the couple’s lavish lifestyle.

Ms. Girardi’s husband, Tom Girardi, helped win the trial that made Erin Brockovich famous. But he has swiftly fallen from grace.

Mr. Girardi, 82, has been suspended from practicing law in California. He and his firm are bankrupt; he’s been moved into a nursing home; and a judge ruled him incompetent to handle his financial affairs. And last November, after 20 years of marriage, Ms. Girardi filed for divorce.

Filming for the current season of “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills” had begun just weeks before. Over the next several months, as Bravo cameras continued to roll, details about Mr. Girardi’s financial and legal troubles were reported in the news.

What has transpired since is made-for-TV drama: accusations of stolen money, Twitter feuds and televised backbiting from Ms. Girardi’s reality co-stars. So it’s no wonder that the couple’s rapidly unfolding drama quickly became the central plotline of the 11th season of the show.



Tom Girardi, once a towering presence in the legal community in Los Angeles, has been suspended from practicing law in California amidst allegations that his law firm misappropriated at least \$24 million. Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times, via Getty Images

A few weeks after Bravo broadcast the first episode on May 19, lawyers disclosed that Mr. Girardi’s law firm may have paid up to \$25 million of his wife’s personal and professional expenses. In July, Ms. Girardi, 50, was named as a defendant in a lawsuit filed by a bankruptcy trustee seeking to recoup some of those dollars.

In a subsequent court filing, the expenses were enumerated in a six-page exhibit and included at least \$850,000 on hair, makeup and nail stylists; at least \$1.3 million on promotion and marketing; and \$14 million in American Express charges.

The dollar amounts, on their own, may not have surprised “Beverly Hills” viewers. Ms. Girardi has bragged on the show about her expensive tastes and the way she has spent the couple’s money.

In her 2018 memoir, “Pretty Mess,” she wrote that several years into her marriage she decided to develop a career in music (she performs under the stage name Erika Jayne) because “there was nothing more I could buy.” (Her best-known song, “XXpen\$ive,” includes the lyrics “Bentleys and Benzes/Through cash-colored lenses/Them dollars and cents/Cha-ching!”)

But her lavish spending is now associated with the alleged misappropriation by her husband of money owed to victims of horrible tragedies.

To date, she has been named in a half-dozen civil lawsuits. Just this week, lawyers for one of those lawsuits sent a subpoena to the show’s producers seeking outtakes that involve her. Additionally, Ms. Girardi may owe millions in unpaid taxes, court filings show.

Ms. Girardi declined to comment for this article. Her lawyer Evan Borges said Ms. Girardi did not have any knowledge of the wrongdoing that her husband is accused of, nor did she know how he managed his law firm’s finances. “Erika doesn’t have personal liability for any of those transactions,” Mr. Borges said.

Most people in Ms. Girardi’s situation would be trying to maintain the lowest possible profile. But she is a Housewife, and discretion doesn’t make for good TV.

Relishing the Attention

Ms. Girardi’s legal and marital turmoil has drawn rabid interest among newcomers and veteran viewers of “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,” who are glued to a spectacle that is unusual even by the standards of the Bravo network, which is basking in the glow of reality TV narrative gold.

The series is currently drawing the highest ratings in the “Real Housewives” franchise.

“The show is an authentic reflection of what occurred in real time,” said Alex Baskin, the president of Evolution Media, which produces the “Beverly Hills” show for Bravo. “No accommodation was made for Erika while shooting.” (What about in editing? “No,” Mr. Baskin said.)

Ms. Girardi appears to be relishing the attention, even as much of it — especially on social media — focuses on her perceived lack of sympathy for the people her estranged husband has been accused of fleecing. This week, she reposted a fan’s Instagram post that compared her suffering to that of Jesus Christ.

When Bravo announced that it would broadcast a four-part reunion show for this season of “Beverly Hills” (only the second time Bravo has broadcast that many episodes for an end-of-season reunion), Ms. Girardi tweeted, “Now what would make it 4 parts?? Me.”

But she also sat down for sessions with her lawyers to prepare for the reunion special, the first episode of which will be broadcast on Oct. 13.

“There is a certain kind of toughness that she presents,” said Mr. Borges. In prepping her for the reunion show, he said, “The first comment to her was: You don’t have to be the tough one. Also, it is OK to be humble.”

Ms. Girardi was raised in Atlanta and moved to New York after high school with dreams of becoming an actress. Her most stable income in those days came from her work as a dancer at go-go clubs in New Jersey.

In 1996, she left for Los Angeles. She met Mr. Girardi at Chasen’s, a restaurant where he was a customer and investor and she was an employee, according to her memoir, which was written with Brian Moylan. The Girardis married in 2000.

In the marriage’s early years, Ms. Girardi devoted herself to her husband, traveling to legal events and awards dinners with him. When they flew to New York on their Gulfstream, she wrote, they could see a club called Shakers where she had once danced, close to Teterboro Airport in New Jersey. “It only took you 10 years to get across the street,” her husband once told her.

Eventually, with Mr. Girardi’s support (financial and otherwise), she hired image consultants, choreographers and music producers to help start her career as a recording artist. Mr. Girardi drew up incorporation papers for his wife’s company, EJ Global.

No expense was spared. Mr. Girardi’s firm began picking up the tab for EJ Global’s mounting bills, including payments of \$1.5 million to McDonald Selznick, a talent agency; \$260,000 to the law firm Greenberg Traurig; and \$252,000 to Troy Jensen, a celebrity makeup artist and image consultant, court filings show.

Ms. Girardi joined “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills” in 2015. Despite the name of the series, Ms. Girardi’s scenes were occasionally shot in her and Mr. Girardi’s Pasadena mansion, which is currently listed for sale at \$8.9 million. Sometimes her husband would make a cameo.

In July, Ms. Girardi was named as a defendant in a lawsuit filed by a bankruptcy trustee seeking to recoup money owed to clients of her estranged husband. Photo illustration by Justin J Wee for The New York Times; Paul Archuleta/Getty Images

Maintaining a Lavish Lifestyle

Mr. Girardi used to be a towering presence in the legal community in Los Angeles. A pioneer in so-called toxic tort cases, he had been respected for his advocacy on behalf of vulnerable clients. His firm, Girardi Keese, represented tens of thousands of clients, often teaming up with other lawyers in big-dollar personal injury lawsuits, including ones filed against pharmaceutical giants and the manufacturers of pelvic mesh products, which have led some women to experience intense pain and bleeding.

His courtroom contributions to the groundwater pollution case made famous in the film “Erin Brockovich” helped secure a \$333 million judgment for victims.

Then, last December, Jay Edelson, a lawyer who had worked closely with Mr. Girardi in successfully suing Boeing on behalf of the relatives of victims of the Lion Air plane crash that killed 189 people in 2018, filed papers in federal court in Chicago, claiming that Mr. Girardi had embezzled at least \$2 million in settlement money owed to these families. Mr. Girardi’s brother, Robert, who is serving as his conservator, did not return requests for comment.

Other claims soon arose. The biggest so far alleges that Mr. Girardi never turned over the proceeds from an \$11 million settlement he had secured eight years ago for a California man named Joseph Ruigomez who suffered burns on over 90 percent of his body.

The bankruptcy trustee has said that at least \$24 million for clients may have been misappropriated. Mr. Girardi is facing lawyer disciplinary charges in California, and the state bar said in June that an audit found mishandled complaints about Mr. Girardi going back 40 years.

Mr. Edelson has said, in court proceedings, that Mr. Girardi was running a “Ponzi scheme,” using client money to keep his firm running and to pay for the extravagant lifestyle he and his wife shared. Mr. Edelson’s law firm on Monday filed a motion in the bankruptcy proceeding to go after Ms. Girardi for any “traceable assets that were embezzled by Tom and potentially given to Erika.”

Tom and Erika Girardi on “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.” Isabella Vosmikova/Bravo and NBCU, via Getty Images

Mr. Edelson’s law firm also sent a civil subpoena this week to Evolution Media, the show’s production company, for any unaired recordings in which Ms. Girardi may have said anything relevant to that asset hunt.

The debts owed by Mr. Girardi’s defunct law firm continue to mount. The firm owes more than \$101 million to clients, a half-dozen legal lenders and other lawyers, according to an August filing by the bankruptcy trustee in the case. To raise cash, an auction of most everything in the law firm’s office was held in August. Among the items was an “Erin Brockovich” poster, signed by the actress Julia Roberts, which sold for \$1,550.

Ms. Brockovich, who still works as an environmental activist and legal advocate, has worked with Mr. Girardi on several other cases. In an interview, she said that until allegations became public, she had been unaware that clients were not receiving their money. She expressed disgust and exasperation at the disparity between the attention paid to the reality show and that given to Mr. Girardi’s clients who are still owed their money.

“It sickens me, it frustrates me, it saddens me,” Ms. Brockovich said. “I cannot fathom how they feel. And yet we keep sensationalizing Tom and Erika.”

Unfolding Dramas, Onscreen

The Beverly Hills show is not the first “Housewives” series to milk narrative value from a legal drama that has affected vulnerable targets. In 2015, one of the cast members from “The Real Housewives of New Jersey,” Teresa Giudice, spent 11 months in federal prison after she pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud and bankruptcy fraud.

This year, a “Real Housewives of Salt Lake City” cast member, Jen Shah, and an assistant were arrested on federal charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering through a telemarketing business that promised tax-preparation and web services to working-class, often aging customers. (They denied the allegations.)

Legal drama on the series “keeps people so intrigued,” said Heather McDonald, who analyzes the show’s episodes and the legal case on her podcast “Juicy Scoop With Heather McDonald.” “It makes you wonder if the only way the show is going to survive is if at all times one or two of these housewives is facing indictment.”

This time, part of the draw for viewers is in dissecting Ms. Girardi’s shifting narrative as it has evolved with news reports of her estranged husband’s legal and health troubles.

In the first episode, during footage filmed before she filed for divorce in November, Ms. Girardi is seen going through her enormous wardrobe and fretting about when she may wear certain items again because of the coronavirus pandemic. She says that one bright spot of the pandemic was that it allowed her and her husband to reconnect.

“Tom and I had dinner at the kitchen table every night,” she says in the episode.

From the time Ms. Girardi files for divorce, however — an action that appears to genuinely surprise her cast mates — she recasts her long-cultivated air of marital bliss in a harsher light. The separation was, she says, a long time coming.

As the season progresses, and more detailed accusations of Mr. Girardi's misdeeds appear in The Los Angeles Times and other news outlets, the conversations among the Housewives revolve with greater frequency around the gravity of the claims, and how much Ms. Girardi knew.

Ms. Girardi, in turn, grows increasingly defensive.

Over rack-of-lamb and caviar pie at a dinner party at Kathy Hilton's Bel Air estate in one episode, one "Beverly Hills" Housewife, Dorit Kemsley, says to Ms. Girardi: "I am going to support you to the bitter end."

With financial support from her husband, Ms. Girardi hired image consultants, choreographers and music producers to help start her career as a recording artist.
Chelsea Guglielmino/Getty Images

But "when you're reading about the victims and the orphans and the widows," she adds, "that's very hard to digest."

"How do you think I feel?" Ms. Girardi responds.

Sutton Stracke, a newer cast member, expresses little sympathy.

"I don't trust that what you've told us is the truth," Ms. Stracke says to Ms. Girardi.

"I'll go head-on with you all day," Ms. Girardi fires back, adding an expletive that she also uses when telling Ms. Stracke to "shut up."

As men in uniforms, white gloves and masks serve food and drinks at the event, Ms. Girardi laments: "Look at my life," she says, adding the same expletive.

Ms. Girardi is likely earning more than \$600,000 from her turn this year on the show, which is still pennies compared to the amount of money she is used to having at her disposal.

But she will end this season banking a valuable reality TV commodity: notoriety. "She is going to be more famous than ever," Ms. McDonald said.

Looking for Hidden Treasure

Ronald Richards, a Beverly Hills lawyer hired by the bankruptcy trustee to help recoup the \$25 million from Ms. Girardi, has sought to cast himself as the best hope for clients and creditors of Mr. Girardi's law firm. "She got \$25 million of firm revenue diverted to her, and she and her lawyer are pretending she is clueless," Mr. Richards said.

Ms. Girardi and Mr. Richards have taken their legal battle to social media. In one instance Ms. Girardi accused Mr. Richards on Twitter of "extortion" after he offered to waive some of his legal fees if she started returning some of the money. Mr. Richards responded by posting the legal definition of extortion. "Not even close," he tweeted.

Filing a lawsuit is one thing. Collecting on it is an entirely different matter. Mr. Richards, in an interview, acknowledged it's unlikely that Ms. Girardi's assets — clothes, jewelry and other items — are worth anything close to \$25 million. Mr. Richards said he does not want to hurt Ms. Girardi and is open to a settlement.

But her lawyer said it's premature to discuss a deal. "Everyone keeps piling on and trashing Erika for things she didn't do," Mr. Borges said, adding, "there is no hidden treasure."

Meanwhile, the legal spectacle has left some victims exasperated.

Mr. Ruigomez was 19 when, in 2010, a gas explosion destroyed his family's home in San Bruno, Calif., killing his girlfriend, burning him and severely damaging his lungs. He has since had nearly three dozen surgeries.

In 2013, Mr. Girardi secured an \$11 million settlement on behalf of Mr. Ruigomez. Pacific Gas & Electric, the giant power company, paid the money to Mr. Girardi's firm years ago. According to court documents, he and his family are still waiting for most of their money.

Kathleen Ruigomez, Mr. Ruigomez's mother, needs the settlement money for her son's continuing medical care, she said. "I do worry about getting paid."

Ms. Ruigomez used to watch and enjoy "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills." But as time passed and Mr. Girardi kept giving her excuses for why they hadn't been paid the full settlement, she began to regard Ms. Girardi with skepticism.

"The first few seasons we kind of liked her, but then we began becoming more and more concerned about our money. Is she spending our money? Now she is very unlikable on the show," Ms. Ruigomez said. "She seems like she almost has an attitude that we victims ruined her gig."

Kitty Bennett contributed research.