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The JD of Reality TV: This Texas litigator co-hosts a podcast devoted to reality TV legal issues

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Texas litigator Angela L. Angotti co-hosts a podcast about Bravo TV programs. (Photo courtesy of Angela L. Angotti)

By training television cameras on real people with ready access to Birkins, Botox, yachts and Champagne, the Bravo network has created a reality TV niche like no other. Enter *The Bravo Docket*, a popular podcast co-founded and co-hosted by Texas litigator Angela L. Angotti, a

partner in the Austin office of Bowman and Brooke. Every week for nearly six years, Angotti and her podcasting partner, Los Angeles entertainment lawyer Cesie Alvarez, have explained the very real legal issues arising from reality TV—breaking down the breakups, makeups, arrests and allegations.

The Bravo Docket started during the pandemic. Can you walk me through its origin story?

I had just moved to Texas when the COVID lockdown happened. At the time, I had severe asthma, so I was terrified and I didn't go outside. I had been a casual viewer of reality TV shows like the *Real Housewives*, but I just started bingeing it in lieu of social interaction. But I've always had a rule where I don't allow myself to spend time on something unless I'm learning something or it's helping me or someone else or I'm making money. Well, I wasn't going to stop watching, so I started writing essays about the legal issues that came up on *Housewives* and posting them on Reddit. They started to get attention. People were reading them and leaving comments, and I could see that people wanted to understand how the legal process was working in those situations—to know what the real story was, and to have basic legal concepts explained. I did one on the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* explaining slander and libel. Cesie commented on that essay, saying, "I'm an attorney, and we should start a podcast." Her comment got more upvotes than my original post. Everyone was like, "That would be so amazing!" and "You guys should do it!" So I messaged her privately and was like, "Hey, let's meet and maybe talk about doing this."

And you did!

Yes, but it was really scary. The biggest thing we were worried about was judgment from other lawyers. Here we were, female litigators in a male-dominated world. We were supposed to be serious and to take everything seriously. We didn't want it to affect our reputations or result in complaints. But it wasn't like that at all. We received so much support, especially from other women attorneys, who'd say things like, "I wish I had something like this in law school." We've also had so many women tell us, "You inspired me to go to law school," and "Hearing you guys talk about it made me feel like I could do it." And that's what I want. I want to create an army of lady lawyers!

I love that. Your podcasting partner is an entertainment lawyer, so there's an obvious synergy between the podcast subject matter and her

practice. But you're a products liability lawyer, so I want to ask, does the podcast benefit your litigation practice, and if so, how?

I average about one big jury trial a year, but a lot of cases settle. The podcast gives me the opportunity to practice explaining complex legal issues in plain language. It helps me practice maintaining an audience's interest every single week, and it helps me with my storytelling, which I think is one of the most important things for being a trial attorney. Practicing those things for a massive audience every single week makes me better at my job. There are so many different areas of the law that we've had to research because of the random, odd and unusual situations these pop culture lawsuits end up in, things you wouldn't research for your own practice. I think that keeps your mind elastic and helps you come up with innovative legal arguments that you maybe would not have come up with otherwise.

And I am sure it benefits your nonlawyer listeners to have these legal concepts explained so clearly.

That was a big part of what we wanted to do, to demystify the law and make it more accessible to nonlawyers. I'm a first-generation attorney and the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college, and I remember being in my first-year law classes and realizing, wow, this is how the world works. I want to make the law more accessible in a substantial way—like, here's what goes into a deposition—and the podcast allows us to do that and make it interesting.

But you also raise issues that are nerdy even for lawyers, like the jurisdictional issues involved with an alleged assault connected to the Below Deck franchise. I thought that discussion was fascinating.

Right? I don't know anything about maritime law, but that's one of the great things about the practice of law, whether you have a podcast or not; it's an excuse to learn new things and to go down rabbit holes.

Is that what led you to law school, a love of searching and solving?

What really motivated me was the court system. My parents divorced when I was 4 years old, and the court system was the only thing that both sides had to listen to. The court would say, "You're both going here at this time," and both parties had to obey it. I think subconsciously I thought if I could be part of that, I would be powerful. I could take care of myself and also help

other people. When I got to law school, I ended up being very depressed. I had worked really hard to get there—I paid for college and law school myself, working two jobs, and quitting wasn't an option.

As you know, the first couple years, you don't do any practical things. I wanted the practical, not the esoteric. So I got an internship at the district attorney's office. Right before I got there, though, a new attorney general had been appointed, and he fired everyone, including the guy who hired me. It was too late for me to get another internship, so I just showed up and hoped I still had a job. On my very first day, the court clerk handed me a docket sheet, and my name was all over it. I asked her, "What does this mean?" And she said, "Those are your appearances."

On day two, I had a bench trial. I hadn't even taken trial [advocacy] yet! I didn't know how to enter anything into evidence. Finally, a judge was so kind, he called me into his chambers and said to me, "I want you to go to the law library and get this book." It was a trial ad book. I stayed up all night reading it, and I remember thinking, oh my God, these are the magic words. I know how to cast the spells now! And I started to think, I can do this. Then I won my first trial, and I was like, this is what I was meant to do. By the time I took trial ad, I had had 25-30 bench trials and had second-chaired a bunch of jury trials. I got an A, and the instructor hired me on the spot.

You weren't daunted by challenge of figuring out how to make a podcast! How do you do it? And not just from a technical standpoint, but also from scheduling standpoint.

The first two years were tough. We did everything ourselves. Now we are with Podcast Nation, and they help with the editing—we couldn't do weekly episodes without them because editing is so time-consuming. But we still do all the research. And I will have the shows on while I'm getting ready in the morning. I am always doing multiple things at once. I'm not going to say it's not hard—there are times when I don't know how I'm going to do it. But it is worthwhile.

There are despicable people on these shows—that's the whole point of the villain edit. But some of them are actually breaking the law. What's your hot take on why they would choose to have their lives televised?

That was one of the things that was so interesting to me! There are so many examples not just of crimes but of federal crimes. Like Julie Chrisley from Chrisley Knows Best cutting and pasting banking documents, which might have been smart because there's no computer record, but then

she put them all in a box, basically all packaged up for the FBI. And Abby Lee Miller from Dance Moms, who wrote in the subject line of an email, “Let’s make money and keep me out of jail.” I am just shocked at the audacity.

What advice do you have for lawyers who are aspiring podcasters?

I would say absolutely go do it. But for young lawyers, I would also say be careful. Cesie and I were already established when we started, and it was still scary. Don’t hesitate to show up as who you are and get your voice out there, but be sophisticated about it because you don’t know who could be listening. Consider partnering with a lawyer who has more experience, because you could also learn from that person.

Would you ever want to do reality TV?

No. Maybe if I had a producer credit and I could control the editing, but I could not sign one of those contracts. You are signing everything away—the producers can lie about you, they can lie to you. You will be embarrassed. You will be humiliated. It’s all fully laid out, and these contracts have been upheld by every court where they’ve been challenged. Ideally, maybe when I get a little older, I’d like to be on TV as the next Judge Judy. That’s my angle.

Jenny B. Davis is a journalism professor at Southern Methodist University, a fashion stylist and former practicing attorney. Her most recent book is Style Wise, a guide for aspiring fashion stylists.



Jenny B. Davis

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