



Fairfax News
The moment of truth

By Mareicka Hardy

'The Moment of Truth' turns into a time of pain

02:32 PM PT, Feb 27 2008

On Monday night's episode of the Fox game show "The Moment of Truth," Lauren Cleri admitted that she had been fired from a job for stealing money, would rather give food to a dog than a homeless person, knows things about her father that she keeps from her mother and has avoided sex with her husband by pretending to be asleep.

Then, things got worse. And, according to an article in the New York Post, Cleri and her husband are now separated because of it.

Yes, said Cleri -- whose husband, parents and siblings were sitting before her, along with a studio audience and 8.9 million television viewers -- she has taken off her wedding ring when out with friends, and, yes, she was still in love with a former boyfriend on her wedding day. After she answered that question truthfully, her ex-boyfriend, Frank, not to be confused with her husband, Frank, took the stage to ask, "If I wanted to get back together with you, would you leave your husband?"

"The Moment of Truth" premiered on Fox in January and has performed very well in the ratings. Contestants must answer 21 questions truthfully in order to win \$500,000. The questions are selected from a pre-interview they did while strapped to a polygraph. The contestant's loved ones also get one, and only one, preemptory challenge in which they can hit a buzzer to skip a question they may not want to hear the answer to. Along the way, contestants can win \$10,000, \$25,000 and so on, and once they reach those milestones, they can quit and keep the money. If they answer a question falsely -- as determined by their pre-interview replies -- they are bounced from the game with nothing.

Howard Schultz, the show's executive producer, said on the telephone Wednesday that they investigate every contestant thoroughly, "to create a composite photograph, a mosaic, if you will."

And they know what they're in for, Schultz said. "We let every contestant know that we're going to reach as deep and as far into their lives as we can. Anything is potentially fair game." He continued: "If we're doing a show called 'The Moment of Truth,' we have to be scrupulously honest with people." According to Schultz, the producers asked ex-boyfriend Frank to keep his

appearance a surprise. A segment producer told Schultz that Cleri had been texting Frank all week to find out whether he might be on the show as one of her interrogators.

As well she should have. Although Cleri's sister hit the buzzer, to much boeing from the audience, when ex-boyfriend Frank asked whether she would leave husband Frank for him, his replacement question was no better: "Do you believe I'm the man you should be married to?" Cleri answered yes, which was apparently the truth, and got to the \$100,000 marker.

The host, Mark Walberg (not that Mark Wahlberg), resumed asking the questions. Has she cheated on her husband? Yes, she has. Frank Cleri put his head in his hands. She had two more questions to go before winning \$200,000.

Then "The Moment of Truth" turned into a modern "Scarlet Letter." Does Cleri think she's a good person? Yes, she does, she answered. No, she doesn't, read the polygraph. Suddenly, Cleri was shocked and penniless. Her family, including her husband, surrounded her. Walberg asked why that might have happened. Cleri said she didn't know, that she does think she's a good person. "Yet it came up as a lie, which means that somewhere in you, you haven't forgiven yourself," Walberg said. "And somewhere your truth is that you don't think you're a good person at all." (An attempt to contact Cleri through her MySpace page went unanswered as of press time.)

Schultz said that from what he's read, the polygraph is 94% to 97% accurate. When a contestant answers falsely on a seemingly simple question, Schultz said sometimes "they don't even hear what they're saying." However, various studies say the accuracy of polygraphs can't be pinpointed, with some tests estimating they're less than 70% accurate.

When "The Moment of Truth" has perhaps busted up a marriage, is the show responsible?

"I don't know," Schultz said. "She's the one answering the questions."

They have a psychologist on the set to talk with contestants and families afterward. In Cleri's case, Schultz said that the infidelity had come up off-camera before the taping, and he said to her, "Do you realize what this could mean?"

For what it ultimately could mean, the Web provided some answers Wednesday. An excerpt of Cleri's episode was highly viewed on YouTube. It had been viewed 146,206 times and counting, with 1,678 comments (and counting).

And on Cleri's MySpace page, the settings had been changed to "private." It read: "Lauren is going through a VERY difficult time right now. Please leave me alone. Please."