

By Herbert E. Nass

## High Flyer

Evel Knievel, professional daredevil, lived hard and died broke. A reading of his will

**R**obert Craig Knievel, purportedly nicknamed “Evel” by police after an arrest for stealing hubcaps off cars, was born on Oct. 17, 1938 in Butte, Mont., and died in Clearwater, Fla., on Nov. 20, 2007, at the age of 69. His will, recently made available to the public, shows that the famous stuntman—who gained worldwide fame between the late 1960s and early 1980s for nationally televised death-defying motorcycle jumps—had broken not only most of his bones, but also his estate. It had assets of just \$12,500. It also has an outstanding liability of an estimated \$64 million to his former press agent, whom Evel was convicted of attacking with a baseball bat.

Evel had been in poor health for years, suffering from diabetes and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a progressive lung disease of unknown origin in which the air sacs become replaced by fibrotic tissue. He’d had a stroke and in 1999, Evel underwent a liver transplant after nearly dying of hepatitis C, which he reportedly believed he’d contracted from a blood transfusion after one of his many crashes. He also suffered the effects of years of heavy drinking, reportedly telling the media that at one time in his life he was downing a half a fifth of whiskey a day, complete with beer chasers.

### Evel’s Will

On March 31, 2006, about 20 months before his death, Evel executed his final last will and testament. In it, he appointed his ex-wife, Krystal Kennedy Knievel, as his personal representative, granting her the author-

ity to administer his estate. The pair married in 1999 and divorced in 2002, but remained together until the end of Evel’s life. Indeed, Evel referred to her in his will as “my spouse.”

Evel didn’t even mention in his will his first wife of 38 years, Linda Joan Bork, the mother of his four children: sons, Kelly and Robbie (a stuntman like his father), and daughters, Tracey and Alicia.

Although Robbie inherited his father’s profession and last name, that’ll probably be about it. Evel may have had four children, 10 grandchildren and one great-grandchild, but the only person named as a beneficiary in his will is Krystal. Specifically, the fourth article of Evel’s four-page will says: “I hereby devise, bequest [sic], and give my whole residuary estate and my automobile(s) to my beneficiary, KRYSTAL KENNEDY KNIEVEL, if she shall survive me.”

This is a strange residuary clause, because the bequest of an automobile usually would be made in provisions of a will bequeathing tangible personal property, and there is such a provision in Evel’s simple will. Perhaps most of the motorcycles and other vehicles Evel rode during the course of his rise and falls to fame didn’t survive the crashes. A handwritten change was made to Evel’s will under the eighth article, the simultaneous death provision, which reads “change to Kelly if both become deceased at the same time.” It seems Evel intended to make his son Kelly the beneficiary of his estate were he and Krystal to die simultaneously, or in the event that Krystal predeceased him.

### Fireworks Funeral

The third article of Evel’s will contains his instructions regarding his funeral: “It is my desire that my bodily remains be disposed of according to my wishes, and to that end, I direct that my funeral be modest in character



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and in keeping with my circumstances in life.”

The funeral turned out to be anything but modest. Red, white and blue fireworks burst overhead as a hearse carried Evel’s body into the Butte Civic Center, the town’s largest indoor venue. Thousands attended his funeral, with hundreds filing past an open casket in which Evel was clad in his signature white leather jacket with red and blue trim. The service was led by televangelist Robert H. Schuller and attended by former heavyweight boxing champ Joe Frazier and actor Matthew McConaughey.

“Modest” may not even be the right word to describe the state of Evel’s finances at the end of his life. More like “disastrous.” He left very little materially. According to an amended petition for administration filed on Jan. 17, 2008 in the circuit court of Pinellas County, Fla., the total value of his assets at the time of his death came to \$12,500. This sum included a 2005 V-Rod Harley Davidson Motorcycle valued at \$10,000.

There are, however, some rather large claims against his estate. The first is a contingent claim related to litigation pending in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Nevada, case number CV-S-05-0574-LDG-PAL. According to the claim filed by attorney Robert Schreiber of the Girardi Law Firm in Manhattan Beach, Calif., an excess of \$5 million will become due against the estate if there is a finding of liability against Evel and his estate for breach of contract, fraud and several other causes of action listed in the court papers.

### Millions Owed

Another, far bigger claim against Evel’s estate is detailed in the statement of claim filed by attorney Temple H. Drummond of Drummond, Wehle & Ross LLP in Tampa, Fla., on behalf of Sheldon A. Saltman, Evel’s former promoter.

On Sept. 21, 1977, Evel assaulted Saltman with a baseball bat, purportedly because of an unflattering portrayal of his personal life in Saltman’s book, *Evel Knievel on Tour* (Dell Publishing, 1997).

Knievel was convicted in California of the assault, and served six months in prison. He also was sentenced



Evel Knievel in 1977  
AP Photo/Michael Ochs

to three years probation. The conviction reportedly devastated sales of Evel Knievel toys that in the 1970s and 1980s sold in the hundreds of millions for Ideal Toy Company and others. Those toys still are available. It’s unclear how much of the money from the sales ever went to Evel and how much, if any, now goes to his estate.

After the conviction, Saltman sued Evel, winning a \$12.75 million judgment for damages, which was unpaid when Evel died. With interest, that claim reportedly has ballooned to more than \$64 million.

But it doesn’t look like Saltman is going to collect, as Evel’s estate clearly has no financial incentive to promote his image.

That means all Evel really left behind is a legend: He crashed spectacularly in 1967 after vaulting his

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motorcycle 151 feet over the fountains of Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. (In 1989, his son Robbie tried the same jump at Caesars Palace and succeeded.)

Also infamous was Evel’s failed attempt in 1974 to jump 1,600 feet across the Snake River Canyon in Idaho on a rocket-powered motorcycle. His parachute opened early and he landed safely.

Evel’s stunts gained him international recognition and resulted in 433 broken bones, earning him an entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Also, when you think of it: How many people can legitimately have listed as an occupation on their death certificate “daredevil”? But that’s precisely what it says on Evel’s death certificate—and no truer words spoken. ■

—Edward J. Romanello, an associate in the firm of Herbert E. Nass & Associates, helped prepare this article.