

LAW OF RICH, FAMOUS: FORGET THE CONSTITUTION

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Wednesday, July 24, 1985

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Every now and then, something gives us a casual glimpse of life among the very rich, and the view can be pathetic. So it is with Palm Beach Ordinance 17-92.

This rotten little law, lampooned recently in the Doonesbury comic strip, requires the registration, fingerprinting and photographing of blue-collar workers employed in this wealthy town, which is separated from the real world by the Fifth Street bridge.

The law specifically applies to hotel and restaurant workers, sales clerks, gardeners, newspaper carriers, janitors, caddies, taxi drivers, domestic servants, charter boat captains and -- curiously -- bath house employees.

All are issued picture ID cards and are subject to spot checks by police. Failure to carry the card is punishable by up to six months in jail.

In almost any other civilized place, such a law would have been hooted off the books a long time ago. Not in Palm Beach, where millionaires apparently are so jittery about their inherited fortunes that the mere sight of a stranger on the street pitches them into apoplexy.

Town police say the ID law helps screen dangerous criminals and keeps Palm Beach safe from predatory scoundrels.

A black man named Ignatius Wallace says the law is discriminatory and violates the right to privacy and free commerce. Two years ago, he tried to get a job at The Breakers and balked at the \$4 cost of "registration."

Wallace filed suit to have the law declared unconstitutional, and his case is now before U.S. District Judge Norman Roettger.

"We as blacks have a badge of identity when we cross that bridge -- the color of our skin," Wallace says. His grandparents were among black landowners burned out of Palm Beach by arsonists at the turn of the century, and his family resettled in West Palm. His mother has had an ID card and worked across the bridge as a maid.

"There are a lot of people who went through the process and didn't want to do it, but they had to, to feed and clothe their kids. You don't know the anguish they went through," Wallace says.

He and lawyer Jim Green of the American Civil Liberties Union assert the ID law is aimed at blacks and Hispanics who make up much of the domestic work force in Palm Beach. City officials contend that the ordinance is applied fairly to all employees.

Which, of course, fails to explain why the photo-fingerprint law exempts bank tellers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians and all white-collar workers.

The real puzzle is, how did the town's luminous lawmakers decide who required an ID and who did not? Or which occupations were above reproach, and which were not?

The authors of this ordinance apparently misplaced their copies of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, or forgot the good parts. In Palm Beach, it seems, janitors are not created equal with plumbers, and waitresses are not created equal with bankers.

The notion of forcing any person to carry an ID card to prove employment is odious. As Green says, "One of the most cherished American freedoms is the freedom to travel from town to town, county to county, state to state, without security checkpoints."

If this law is supposed to be such a swell crime-fighting tool, one might wonder if it isn't aimed at the wrong people. Despite all Palm Beach's vaunted security, young David Kennedy had no trouble finding all the cocaine and pills he needed to kill himself.

And the two Palm Beach residents now awaiting trial for one of the town's seediest murders never had to register with police. One is a well-to-do shopowner. The other is a doctor.

If Ordinance 17-92 eventually is upheld, perhaps it ought to be expanded -- for crime-fighting purposes, of course. Each millionaire ought to be forced to carry identification -- if not a picture ID, at least a laminated copy of his E.F. Hutton statement. And maybe a note from his analyst.

These days you can't be too careful.

Edition: FINAL

Section: LOCAL

Page: 1C

Index Terms: PLM BCH LAW

Record Number: 8502270709

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