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Cloned baby claim sets lawyer on path of stem-cell advocacy Bernard Siegel takes up cause after cult-linked Clonaid announces birth



Siegel

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BLADE SCIENCE WRITER

If this was a fictional account of human cloning, a character like Bernard Siegel's would be just too unlikely.

In December, 2002, Mr. Siegel was practicing personal injury law in Coral Gables, Fla. Before that, he had a sports agency business. He was the owner of Florida Championship Wrestling for awhile. He's worked in family law, dealing with parental kidnapping. Then he owned the Miami Tropics, a minor-league basketball team.

So he's not exactly the guy you pick to lead an international campaign to support science. Maybe this whole chapter in human cloning ought to be in a novel.



[Zoom](#)

Plot summary: Florida lawyer takes on a UFO cult and ends up leading a high-powered crusade to protect the science of human stem cells before the United Nations.

Nah. Who would believe it?

It started with a CNN broadcast. In the camera's eye was a woman with streaked orange hair, striped hose, bare midriff, and membership in a group formed to establish an embassy on Earth to greet the return of our spacemen creators. In a Holiday Inn in Broward County, Florida, she announced the birth of the world's first cloned baby named, of course, Eve.

Bernie Siegel was at home watching TV with his wife Sheryl. The announcement by Clonaid President Brigitte Boisselier bothered him, he said. He was no cloning expert, but he knew about child-protection laws. If there was a baby made by cloning — a process so risky that most animals die in the attempt — then maybe she needed protection from anyone so reckless as to try the procedure in the first place.

"If they produced a child, they inflicted some untested medical experiment on a child without a medical safety net," Mr. Siegel said.

Should he file a petition with the court to protect this child? He talked it over with Sheryl. He decided to sleep on it.

The next morning, New Year's Eve, he awoke with a mission. He drew a legal petition requesting protective custody for "Eve," filed it in the Broward County court, and went home.

“I thought, this could be the first case that established the rights of a cloned human,” he said.

That night, he watched CNN again. Across the bottom of the screen, a news ticker said a Florida lawyer had petitioned for a guardian for the cloned child.

“My wife turns to me and says, ‘Bernie, what did you do?’”

His next CNN moment was a couple of days later. This time, a CNN reporter called to tell him that the leader of the UFO group, Rael, was unhappy with Mr. Siegel’s petition. So Rael advised Ms. Boisselier to withdraw her commitment to submit the cloned Eve’s DNA for testing. Without that test, cloning could not be proven.

Could Mr. Siegel comment?

“I said, well, [Rael is] a better space alien than lawyer.”

And of course, this was followed by another CNN moment, this one on Connie Chung Live. Mr. Siegel and Rael both were interviewed by Ms. Chung. She asked them both if they were after publicity. Both said no. She asked Rael, who she agreed to call “your holiness” at his insistence, if he was a fraud. Again, no.

As the CNN interview went forward, Mr. Siegel had an epiphany of sorts.

“As I was debating this guy [who was] wearing a space suit ... it occurred to me that there was a more serious aspect to this.”

He realized Rael and the Clonaid people, who seemed to operate at the very fringes of science and medicine, were among those testifying before Congress about human cloning. Mr. Siegel thought: How did this make mainstream science look?

He feared the Raelians and others on the fringe could derail the work of stem cell science.

As his clone custody case got rolling, Mr. Siegel started looking into the science of stem cells. By this point, few people believed Clonaid had cloned anything at all, although the organization now claims it’s made 13 cloned babies for people who paid between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a pop.

Mr. Siegel’s pursuit of Clonaid ended when the company said baby Eve — who they never proved existed — was now in Israel. Unless Mr. Siegel wanted to pursue the case overseas, the fight was over.

But now, Mr. Siegel had a new role: champion of scientists. Although he was a complete outsider, he managed to recruit some of the world’s leading stem cell scientists to his newly formed organization, the Genetics Policy Institute.

Next stop: The United Nations.

There, in 2003, a move was afoot to pass a resolution against all forms of human cloning — both cloning to make babies, and cloning to make stem cells.

Up to that point, pro-life groups were the only ones lobbying about cloning, and they opposed it, according to an analysis by the Center for Genetics and Society, a nonprofit information organization.

Mr. Siegel changed the balance of lobbying, launching an e-mail, telephone, and letter-writing campaign in support of cloning.

He believes it stopped the ban. In November, a single vote prevented the U.N. from taking steps to consider the anti-cloning resolution, which had the support of the Bush administration. Instead, the U.N. voted to put off consideration until this month.

Once again, Mr. Siegel is at the United Nations lobbying for stem cell research and cloning. Again, the resolution to ban all forms of cloning is up for consideration.

"I've been at the U.N. all morning. It looks like the tide is turning," Mr. Siegel said Thursday. Seven African nations previously on board with the resolution announced they no longer support a cloning ban, he said.

By Monday, it appeared the U.N. would again delay a cloning vote, at least until the U.S. November elections.

"Mr. Siegel's work is very important," to the debate, said Myungjae Hahn, a legal adviser for the South Korean delegation. South Korea is a world leader in cloning and stem cell research. And Mr. Siegel says, he's just just getting rolling.

"I think, in the long-term, the Genetics Policy Institute wants to establish a legal framework to advance scientific research for cures. We want to develop a think-tank. We want to have a journal. We want to have a newsletter. We want to be real players in this," the former wrestling commissioner said.

"Why not? I'm a visionary," he said. "Who's to say I can't do this, right?"
