



## 'America the Beautiful' Probes Fashion's Ugly Side

By Frances C. Whittelsey - WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS)--A trio of movies this year explores how beauty in the United States has come to be equated with ultra-thin, highly toned bodies that can't be achieved by most people.

In the documentary "America the Beautiful," which has been showing in independent movie houses in select cities since May, filmmaker Darryl Roberts confronts fashion insiders about their reliance on wire hanger-thin models.

"It's just that the fabric is so expensive, and the detailing," Greg Moore, a producer of shows for New York Fashion Week, says in the film. "If you make a dress that's a size 4, and no one buys it, you've only bought three yards. If she's a size 10, you've bought 10 yards. If you've spent \$10,000 on fabric, and no one buys it, you've lost \$10,000 in fabric."

Roberts' film is one of three independently made movies this year to focus on America's toxic obsession with weight and its impact on the self-esteem of women and girls, including models. Together, they raise a chorus of demand for change aimed at the multi-billion-dollar fashion and diet industries and TV networks garnering high ratings from shows such as NBC's "The Biggest Loser."

"Everywhere you look, we're sold the promise that if you're beautiful, your life will be better," says Roberts, 46, a former on-air TV personality, for whom this is a second foray into movie making. His first film was "How U Like Me Now," which dealt with relationships in the 1990s. "Is it possible the beauty promise is a lie? Just plain and simple propaganda?"

### **No Comment from Fashion Council**

A spokesperson for the New York-based Council of Fashion Designers of America said leaders of the organization declined to answer that question or any other raised by the films.

For filmmaker Diane Israel, the pursuit of the beauty ideal proved almost fatal. Her film, "Beauty Mark," which debuted last February at the University of Colorado, Boulder, describes her descent into anorexia. An elite triathlete, her destructive eating habits and obsessive exercising led to physical collapse and the end of her athletic career at age 28. Poor nutrition left her with bones like a 70-year-old woman.

The third movie, first shown in July in Manhattan, is "disFigured," the only one to treat the topic fictionally. Filmmaker Glen Gers tells the story through two main characters, a recovering anorexic and an overweight woman who first see each other at a "fat acceptance" group. Darcy, the anorexic, inappropriately tries to find support there. The group rejects her, but later she becomes a close friend to the overweight Lydia.

The central character in Roberts' documentary is Gerren Taylor, who became a celebrated runway model at age 12 while she was still playing with Barbie dolls. But soon after her rise to success, she was rejected by agencies and designers despite being a size 4 with not an ounce of extra fat; the spread of her hip bones (she was almost 6 feet tall at 12) made her obese in their eyes.

### **Weight a Recent Obsession**

While women have long been pressured to keep their bodies fashionable it was not until the end of the 1970s and early 1980s that low weight became the overriding goal and the subject of an explosion of books and articles about dieting, according to "The Beauty Myth," the 1991 book by feminist critic Naomi Wolf. She links the obsession to a new commercial imperative: Women no longer consumed by domestic duties had to be motivated to keep lusting for products and services, this time not to banish "ring around the collar," as a Tide ad once promised, but to be unrealistically thin.

Since the 1970s, the escalating pressures have been reflected in the shrinking size of fashion models. "Even in the '90s the models were not skeletal, but today the fashion industry says clothes look better on hangers and want women (models) like hangers," said Lynn Grefe, president of the Seattle-based National Eating Disorders Association. "Even if people don't develop eating disorders, the self-esteem issues are rampant," said Grefe, who appears in Roberts' film.

According to a 1996 study, an estimated 80 percent of young adult U.S. women were dissatisfied with their appearance, and particularly their weight. But an estimated 10 million women and girls, and a million boys and men, have slipped beyond dissatisfaction into life-threatening battles with anorexia and bulimia, according to studies. "I meet the parents and see the tears from people who've lost a loved one from something that could be stopped," says Grefe.

Efforts to prevent eating disorders have been underway for years but until recently, none has proven to significantly reduce the risk, according to Eric Stice, a leading researcher in the field who works at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene.

### **Peer Group Intervention**

The best results to date have come from an intervention called the Body Project, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, in which Stice has played a principle role. Earlier prevention efforts have involved telling young women about unrealistic body images and the dangers of eating disorders but the messages have not stuck.

In contrast, the Body Project's approach has been to show small groups of high school and college students pictures from magazines and then to ask them to talk about how these images affect adolescent girls. "We've proven that if the information comes out of their mouths, they listen to themselves," says Stice. This approach has been replicated successfully a dozen times, including among sorority sisters at Trinity University.

This small-group technique, however, can hardly counter the relentless mass media promotion of thinness.

Grefe thinks it's time to try other routes, such as applying workplace safety laws to fashion companies that require models to be too thin for their health. She'd prefer a voluntary approach, but said she was deeply disappointed by the failure of the Council of Fashion Designers of America to suggest a minimum body-mass index requirement after the deaths of two models in 2006 from anorexia. The council's spokesperson said there would be no response to Grefe's comment.

While acknowledging that he is "just one guy trying to make a difference," Roberts, meanwhile, has been using his movie as the focus of a crusade against a proposed new MTV show called "Model Makers." MTV issued a call for women who want to be models willing

"to endure 12 weeks of intensive physical fitness training to get them down to their ideal size."

His efforts have apparently succeeded. MTV now says it has no plans to air the show.

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