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Doug Moe

Doug Moe: Ugliest couch and proud of it

By Doug Moe
September 24, 2003

CAMILLE HEMPEL, who has the ugliest couch in America and \$5,000 to prove it, first went soft on sofas while living just off West Mifflin Street in 1990.

The area, known to those of a certain vintage as Miffland, is ground zero for sagging sofas. No student housing porch is complete without one. The couch should have coffee stains, a spring sticking out, and when you look under the lumpy cushions it's like cutting open the shark's belly in "Jaws."

Hempel, who grew up in Janesville and now lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., was in her last year at UW-Madison in 1990 when she decided that it was finally time for her apartment couch to go to the big living room in the sky. Her boyfriend's cat had pretty well shredded it. Somewhat reluctantly, she dragged the couch to the curb.

"An hour later, it was on the porch across the street," Hempel was saying Monday. "I got kind of jealous. I had to look at it every time I went out the front door."

Hempel wound up taking a picture of the couch and, with that, began an odyssey that culminated last week when the studio audience at Tuesday's "Live With **Regis** and **Kelly**" show in New York City picked Hempel's current couch - pink and brown, with its right side supported by a cinder block - as the ugliest couch in the United States.

The contest, sponsored by the Sure Fit slipcover

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About Doug

A lifelong resident of Madison, Doug Moe has written a daily column about the city for The Capital Times since 1997. Prior to that, he was editor of Madison Magazine. His books include "The World of Mike Royko," which was a Chicago Tribune Choice Selection of the Year, and "Uncommon Sense: The Life of Marshall Erdman," written with Alice D'Alessio. His new book, "Lords of the Ring: The Triumph and Tragedy of College Boxing's Greatest Team," a history of the storied varsity program at the University of Wisconsin, will published in 2004.

company, drew more than 1,000 entries. First prize was \$5,000. Online voting - more than 50,000 ballots were cast - narrowed the field to three, and last week all three couches and their owners were chatted up by **Regis Philbin** on national TV. When the audience's votes were totaled, the 35-year-old Hempel emerged victorious.

"I'm on couch cloud nine," she told me.

Hempel is a deserving winner. It's almost certain nobody in the United States has spent more time considering couches than Hempel. She has photographed them, painted them - her UW degree is in art - and rescued them from untold numbers of curbs. "I have hundreds of pictures of couches," Hempel said. "I got obsessed with the whole thing."

She moved to New York in 1992; her sister, **Heather Hempel**, still lives in Madison. In New York City, Hempel, who earns a modest living designing and making jewelry - "I'm basically a starving artist," she said - encountered a whole new world of decaying masterpieces.

"I'll see them on the curbs when I'm riding my bike around the city and then come back later at night," Hempel said. Sometimes it's just to take a photo. "I have a red El Camino and I'll shine the lights on the couch," she said. "Those photos can look like a crime scene."

Other times, she takes the whole couch. That was the case four years ago when a friend called to report a brown and pink sofa sitting curbside in Queens. Hempel took the couch home to Brooklyn and had to immediately stare down a revolt from her roommates. Some people look at an ugly couch and see, well, an ugly couch.

Hempel pleaded the sofa's case and won a stay of execution. A good thing, too, because in August, when another friend was shopping online for slip covers and came across the Sure Fit Ugly Couch Contest, Hempel knew she had a contender.

"I set up my camera in my living room, which is also my kitchen," Hempel said. She snapped the photo and sent it off to the contest, where the competition turned out to be heated.

"We used to ask people to include themselves in the picture of the sofa," a Sure Fit executive, **Maris F. Thalberg**, recently told the New York Times. "But some people sent pictures of themselves naked."

The Times actually had someone reporting backstage from the "Regis and Kelly" show last week. Besides Hempel and her cinder block special, the two other finalists were a velvet red sofa from Virginia and what the Times called "a plaid monstrosity" from Iowa. Those couch owners were flown in at the show's expense and put up at a classy Manhattan hotel. Since Hempel lives in Brooklyn, the producers hadn't thought that she, too, might enjoy such pampering.

"When do I ever get to stay in a fancy hotel in Manhattan?" Hempel asked. The producers gave her tickets to a Broadway show instead.

 [Email Doug](#)



Camille Hempel and her ugliest couch, which won her \$5,000 in a Sure Fit slipcover company contest.

On the day of the show, the Times reporter caught up with Hempel backstage just before air time. "I'm totally in it for the glory," she said.

Now the glory is hers. First the live telecast of her victory, then the Times article. This week Hempel was wondering where it all might end when a representative of a prestigious publisher of art books got in touch to wonder if there wasn't maybe a book in all those photographs of all those couches.

"We have a meeting set for next week," Camille Hempel said.

Heard something Moe should know? Call 252-6446, write PO Box 8060, Madison, WI 53708, or e-mail dmoe@madison.com.

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