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Marmer Penner Newsletter

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Can a Kid Squeeze By On \$320,000 A Month?

The tale of Lisa Bonder Kerkorian, the 36-year-old former tennis pro who is demanding \$320,000 a month in child support from her former husband, the 84-year-old billionaire Kirk Kerkorian, has caused a stir among hard-working Americans.

Mrs. Kerkorian, who was married to Mr. Kerkorian for one month in 1998, filed court papers on January 7, seeking support for their daughter, Kira, 3. Among other things, she wants \$14,000 a month for parties and play dates; \$5,900 for eating out; \$4,300 for eating in; \$2,500 for movies and other outings; \$7,000 for charitable donations; \$1,400 for laundry and cleaning; \$1,000 for toys, books and videos; \$436 for the care of Kira's bunny rabbit and other pets; and \$144,000 for travel on private jets.

Sure, that sounds like a lot of Taco Bell for a 3-year-old, but Mrs. Kerkorian will need every penny. Doesn't Mr. Kerkorian realize how much it costs to raise a child in Los Angeles?

The list of required child-rearing items and services grows every year, Hollywood parents said last week. First of all, the moms and dads all get nervous about whose children's party is bigger and splashier. The Hotel Bel-Air was the site last year of a tea party for a 2-year-old, and all the toddlers got full tea sets upon departing, complete with decaf Darjeeling. Who cares if they knew what

Darjeeling was? Or, for that matter, if they could even say “Daddy” or “Mercedes-Benz” yet?

And there was the Hollywood mom who hired dancers from Cirque du Soleil for her child’s birthday party, spending \$30,000, according to one guest. Mrs. Kerkorian herself gave a \$70,000 party for Kira’s second birthday at the Hotel Bel-Air in 1999.

“It all got out of control and Peter Guber hired an elephant for rides at his kid’s birthday party about six years ago,” said one anxious Hollywood parent, who could afford only the guy who dresses up as Wood from “Toy Story” at his child’s party.

How can Mr. Kerkorian, who controls MGM and the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas, among many other things, expect his daughter to develop into a responsible, caring, intelligent human being without a \$70,000 birthday party every year? After all, just clothing the kids is hard enough in a city like Los Angeles. At Fred Segal in Santa Monica, children cry if they don’t get sequined and embroidered Replay sweatshirts at \$74 a pop. (Watch the P.B. ‘n’ J., little buddy!) Another big seller is the full-length leather coat by Quincy, at \$800 for 6-year-olds.

At the Neiman Marcus children’s department in Beverly Hills, the Burberry pram is a brisk seller for new mothers, at \$4,250, but you have to get the Loro Piana cashmere throw (\$525) and socks (\$325) to go with it.

How can Mr. Kerkorian, who is trying to sell his 81 percent stake in MGM, ask his child to go without \$325 cashmere socks? And how will Mrs. Kerkorian pay for the SAT prep classes (long-term programs in reading and math begin at age 4) at Score! in Beverly Hills on the \$75,000 a month Mr. Kerkorian was shelling out until last September? A woman can barely get a set of acrylic nail tips for that in Los Angeles.

West Los Angeles is one of the most competitive areas in the country for private schools. It is typical, one father said, for an 8-year-old to have taken prep

courses for the Independent School Entrance Examination, given to children of grade school age who want to attend private school.

Getting around isn't cheap, either, for children in the Benedict Canyon set. Though only a tot, Kira has flown 35 times on private jets to places like New York and France. For the \$144,000 her mother has requested, she can probably get to France and back on a chartered jet only four times a month.

A Hollywood screenwriter said that a classmate of his son at the Brentwood School, an elite school in Los Angeles, reported that students were talking one day about travel plans. "One of them said to the other, 'Flying commercial is so bogus, dude,'" he said. He added that he took his 11-year-old to a birthday party two years ago, and another child walked into the house and said loudly: "Oh my God, how can anyone live in this place? It's so tiny."

Newspapers have been flooded with indignant letters accusing Mrs. Kerkorian of avarice and of having an outsize sense of entitlement. One reader of The Los Angeles Times compared her lifestyle to "an orgy of consumption that rivals France in 1789."

But if anybody prepared Mrs. Kerkorian for a life of consumption, it was Mr. Kerkorian – and his \$6 billion or so. The couple met in 1986, playing tennis, when she was 20 and he 68, according to her court declaration. They became tennis partners, then lovers five years later when her first marriage fell apart. He spent lots of money on her. She quit working. He took her to Hawaii. She wanted to marry. He didn't. He took her to Europe. He still wouldn't marry her. She even became pregnant, but still no nups.

Finally, five months after Kira was born, Ms. Bonder and Mr. Kerkorian were married, to confer "dignity and respect" on the child, she said in her court papers. The marriage came with strings. Mr. Kerkorian stipulated that they divorce a month later, and Mrs. Kerkorian waived her right to spousal support. Child support was set at \$35,000 a month, but under California law, she was free to negotiate for more.

Mr. Kerkorian had to see that coming. He and Mrs. Kerkorian, his third wife, had met at the magical crossroads of beauty, youth, sex and money, in a city where good looks are considered hard currency and more dependable, when invested properly, than Treasury bills. "Money was never a limitation, or even a consideration, when Kirk wanted to either construct, acquire, own, charter, hire or pay for such desires as

homes, airplanes, yachts, hotels, cars, staff or entertainment,” Mrs. Kerkorian said in her court papers. “Essentially, whatever Kirk wanted, Kirk got.”

What Mrs. Kerkorian wanted, at least until a few days ago, was \$320,000 a month. But her lawyer, Stephen A. Kolodny, now says that is not enough. “We forgot the category for major yacht charters,” he said.

By Alex Kuczynski
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