

Hot Coffee Documentary Comes to Coffee Capital

Local News

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SEATTLE, Wash. - The movie "Hot Coffee" focuses on a controversy its filmmaker says has been brewing for years - between corporate America and the legal system. Over the next few months, [screenings and discussions](#) are being held in at least eight Washington cities statewide, starting Wednesday in Seattle. Visit the movie's website at www.hotcoffeethemovie.com

The case of the woman who sued McDonald's when she was scalded by hot coffee got international attention, but it's only one example in the film. Director Susan Saladoff says corporations continue to spend millions to distort public perceptions of lawsuits - and are working to "cap" or limit damages when they're found liable.

When you put a cap on these cases, the taxpayers wind up paying the balance, because when the insurance companies and the defendant are limited in what they have to pay, doesn't mean that the person injured doesn't need the money to pay for their medical bills and so on. It just means that we, as taxpayers, pay through Medicare or Medicaid. - Director Susan Saladoff

A former attorney, Saladoff contends the judicial system is being influenced by money and power just as much as the other branches of government - and believes it's becoming harder to get a fair trial.

The film also makes a powerful case about corporate influence in elections. Attorney Michael Withey with the Washington State Assn. for Justice says it's something Washingtonians have experienced, with a couple of high-profile cases in recent years involving business organizations working to unseat judges and a state insurance commissioner.

"You're not allowed to lobby judges, you know, and you shouldn't be allowed to lobby judges. Yet, if big corporate interests put millions and millions of dollars into campaigns for elections and judicial elections, there's the appearance, at least, of influence. We just can't have that."

Withey sees "Hot Coffee" as a wake-up call for Americans to protect their constitutional rights, including the Seventh Amendment right to a jury trial.

The film sparks lively discussions wherever it is shown, Saladoff says.

"People say, 'I vote, I'm smart, I read the newspaper - and I had no idea about these issues. I was completely wrong in my perception, I will never think that way again and I will never vote that way again.' It has really been extraordinary, the response."

She will attend the Seattle screening on April 11, along with former Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Oliver Diaz, whose case is part of the movie. The evening begins with a 5:30 p.m. reception, followed by the film at 6:30 p.m. and a discussion afterward. It will be at the downtown Seattle Public Library, 1000 4th Ave.

The movie can also be seen on HBO. The screening schedule in Washington state is available online at washingtonjustice.org.

- Chris Thomas