

# Mom apologizes for fake essay in contest

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sion show of the same name.

The winning essay started, "My daddy died this year in Iraq," Ms. Ceballos, according to contest officials, said that Army Sgt. Jonathon Menjivar had died in a roadside bombing April 17.

But that name appeared nowhere on Defense Department casualty lists. When asked about the discrepancy at a Dec. 28 publicity event, Ms. Ceballos refused to answer and fled the Club Libby Lu store in Garland's Firewheel Town Center.

She confessed later that day.

"We wrote whatever we could do to win," she told *The Dallas Morning News*. "It said to write an essay. It never said it had to be true. I never said it was true."

Club Libby Lu, which sells merchandise and parties targeted at "tween" girls, withdrew the prize the next day and awarded the concert trip to Albany, N.Y., to another girl.

"We appreciate that Ms. Ceballos took responsibility for her actions on the broadcast," the company said in a statement Friday. "We are sorry that her daughter was placed in this unfortunate situation."

Ms. Ceballos declined to comment further when reached after her appearance Friday on *Today*.

"I don't want to talk," she said. "I've already talked. But thank you."

Her attorney, Frank Perez, said that his client was mentally and physically exhausted after a week-long public firestorm. Ms. Ceballos has received anonymous threats and moved her family from their Garland apartment out of fear, he said.

"She's just shell-shocked," Mr. Perez said. "It's been pretty tough. ... Every day there's something on the TV or the Internet. She's bombarded with criticism."

Ms. Ceballos said on *Today* that she has trouble eating and sleeping and feels depressed. She removed her MySpace page because of harassing messages, Mr. Perez said.

On another social networking site, visitors left angry and profane messages calling Ms. Ceballos a liar and a bad mother. On the same page, Ms. Ceballos had written that having everything for her children made her happy.

"I intended to help my daughter realize her dream of seeing Hannah Montana," she said in Friday's prepared statement. "Instead, I brought so much negative attention to my family."

Mr. Perez said concern for her daughter prompted Ms. Ceballos to make the public apology.

"She made a bad decision, and she acknowledges that," he said. "She wants forgiveness, and she wants her life back."

Psychiatrist Lisa Clayton, who appeared with Ms. Ceballos and her attorney on *Today*, said that the Garland mother did lose a cousin in



Priscilla Ceballos

according to a Google News search. More than 200 readers responded to an online survey posted Thursday on Dallasnews.com.

Three respondents said they would lie to obtain a high-demand prize for their children. One questioned the rampant public outrage.

"She submitted an essay that she thought had the best chance at winning the tickets. What's the problem?" the respondent wrote. "The instructions didn't say it had to be true. ... This lady won a contest fair and square, and now the prize is being withheld; that's the problem."

But most who contacted *The News* about the story condemned Ms. Ceballos.

"Not only is it insulting and insensitive to those widows and children who have truly lost their fathers, it is also frightening to think of a mother molding a child to believe that lying and cheating are acceptable in the pursuit of self-indulgence," Michelle Ferrer of Garland wrote in an e-mail last week.

"How can anyone justify such a deception with the excuse that the

Iraq. Mr. Perez said later that he didn't know the cousin's name.

The fake-essay story quickly became worldwide news and was reported by more than 500 media outlets,

## WINNING WORDS

A Club Libby Lu spokeswoman provided this description of the store's "Hannah Montana Rock Your Holidays Essay Contest":

"We want to hear how you're going to ROCK someone else's holiday. Maybe it's Mom, your best friend, or maybe it's someone you don't even know! It's easy: just write (no more than 5 sentences) and send it to us. Maybe you are donating a coat (sorry sis) or maybe you are making breakfast in bed for your Mom (maybe next year Dad!); whatever it is tell us all about it."

essay rules did not specifically state that lying was not allowed?"

After seeing Ms. Ceballos' television appearance, Ms. Ferrer said she wasn't sure the woman understood why what she did was wrong.

"The message has been lost on her," she said. "I'm glad that she's paid a price, and I hope that she learns a lesson from it and that it's the right lesson."

## DigitalEXTRA

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[dallasnews.com/extra](http://dallasnews.com/extra)