

News director defends reporter

Finances led to non-renewal of contract, A.H. Belo official says

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The executive news director for WFAA-TV said Friday that his station chose not to renew reporter Charles Duncan's contract for financial reasons, not because its confidence in Duncan had been shaken.

"I have always had the utmost faith in Charles Duncan and his ability as a reporter," said Marty Haag, who is also vice president of news in the broadcast division of the A.H. Belo Corp.

Haag spent the day on the witness stand defending Duncan's 10-part series about former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell. The series aired on Channel 8 in 1985.

Haag repeatedly denied allegations from Feazell's attorney, Gary Richardson, that his former senior reporter was on a "mission" with a preconceived story line designed to destroy Feazell's credibility.

Feazell claims that Duncan's series was rife with malicious inaccuracies. He is seeking \$52 million in the libel trial, which enters its fifth week when Haag's testimony resumes Monday.

As Duncan did for 10 days on the witness stand, Haag renewed denials that Duncan was out to get Feazell. He also denied that the series was linked to Feazell's involvement in summoning a Waco grand jury that cleared Henry Lee Lucas in three

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McLennan County homicides to which Lucas had confessed.

"I reject that wholeheartedly," Haag said. "There is no basis in fact for that whatsoever."

Feazell had Lucas brought from Georgetown, where he was in the custody of the Texas Rangers Lucas task force, in April 1985, after Lucas' confession to a Bellmead murder spoiled an ongoing investigation by McLennan County Deputy Truman Simons.

After the grand jury no-billed Lucas, his unchallenged confessions to more than 600 murders around the country began to come apart. Feazell claims the ensuing embarrassment to Department of Public Safety officials prompted Duncan's series.

He also contends that the federal, state and local investigation that resulted in his bribery and racketeering indictment was sparked by vengeful law enforcement officials mad about the results of the Lucas grand jury. A federal jury in Austin acquitted Feazell in 1987.

Duncan, now a private investiga-

tor in Dallas, and Haag dismissed claims that the Lucas story had any ties to Duncan's series about Feazell.

Duncan met with DPS investigator Ron Boyter and former Waco police legal adviser Bill Johnston two weeks after the Lucas grand jury in Waco. The pair gave Duncan leads upon which Duncan based his series about Feazell, Duncan has testified.

Haag testified that he had complete confidence in the accuracy of Duncan's stories about Feazell, despite at least two specific illustrations from Richardson that proved to the contrary.

"I think that individual particulars do not detract from the overall tenure of Mr. Duncan's series," Haag said.

Haag denied suggestions from Richardson that pressure for Channel 8 to remain No. 1 in the eighth-largest television market in the nation could have clouded Duncan's and the station's judgment to create a story for the sake of ratings.