

Kathie Lee Gifford leaves show

NEW YORK (AP) — Kathie Lee Gifford surprised viewers of "Live with Regis & Kathie Lee" Tuesday by announcing she is breaking up the act, and apparently that's her final answer.

She said she's leaving the show this summer and ending her 15-year run as sidekick to Regis Philbin, who stuck by her through tabloid scandals, bad wardrobe days and endless talk about her son Cody.

"It's the right time," said Gifford, 46, whose contract ends in August.

Philbin asked if she was kidding and she said no.

Gifford, who recently performed a fill-in role in the Broadway musical "Putting it Together" and was guest host last week for David Letterman's "Late Show," said she misses singing and acting and wants to "spread my creative wings."

Philbin, 66, will continue without her, despite his busy schedule as host of ABC's prime-time game show sensation, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" His query to contestants, "Is that your final answer?" has become a national catchphrase.

Philbin is signed to do the daytime show through the summer of 2001 and is expected to sign an extension that takes his prime-time success into account. The Hollywood Reporter said the deal is expected to earn Philbin \$20 million per year.

He and Gifford first began working together in 1985 on the morning show, then aired only in New York City. It became syndicated for a national audience in 1988, and now ranks a solid fourth in the talk show derby behind Oprah Winfrey, Jerry

Springer and Rosie O'Donnell.

Their light mix of celebrity chat and entertainment began each morning with Philbin and Gifford riffing on the day's news, or what they did the night before.

Gifford said that's part of what has driven her away. After years of talking on the air about Cody, 10, and her daughter Cassidy, 7, she doesn't want them as the subject of attention anymore.

"I no longer feel comfortable sharing the ordinary, innocent, everyday details of my family life, only to watch the tabloid media turn them into harmful, misleading and libelous stories," she said.

Cody Gifford is, however, making his acting debut in a Disney movie airing March 12 on ABC.

Gifford's over-the-top persona made her a ripe subject for tabloids and parodies. She lampooned her image in a song she wrote and sang while filling in for Letterman last week. Last summer, newspaper gossip columns made a running issue of her revealing clothing on the show.

She became a target of labor activists when they said her clothing line was produced in foreign sweatshops, and she pledged to work to end abuses in the apparel industry. Gifford, married to former football star Frank Gifford, also went through the embarrassment of her husband's 1997 affair with a flight attendant, allegedly set up by a tabloid.

Although its ratings are down about 10 percent this year, most talk shows have seen their viewership decline. "Live with Regis & Kathie Lee" is attractive to advertisers

"I would think this is a good opportunity to inject some new blood."

Richard Kurlander
TV syndication expert

because it is entertaining and non-controversial, said Richard Kurlander, an expert in TV syndication for Petry Television.

While it would have trouble surviving without Philbin, Gifford can be replaced, he said.

"She has her positives," Kurlander said, "but she also has her negatives. I would think this is a good opportunity to inject some new blood."

Gifford has had several fill-in hosts through the years, including Philbin's wife, Joy. It's unclear whether a replacement will be quickly named, or whether Philbin will work for a while with a series of side-kicks in a sort of public audition process.

"I have loved my years with you," Gifford told Philbin.

"You've been the greatest professional partner a person could ever have."

Philbin replied: "It's been a lot of fun. We'll miss you tremendously. It's going to be a very tough pair of shoes to fill."

Movie has rushed end

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I left the theater wishing the script had given her more room for development.

Robert Downey Jr. also does well as Grady's washed-up drug-using editor, whether his performance is truly a work of art or simply a-day-in-the-life is questionable.

Though all performances were a success, none of the characters are easily identified with, unless of course you are a middle-aged English professor who smokes a lot of weed and has sex with your boss's wife.

Otherwise, little sympathy is evoked, which leaves "Wonder Boys" as a close-up character study that leaves viewers far from an impacting end.

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