

Storm clouds gather over Maryland's Blue Sky Films



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Martin Gruber always made a backup. Of that, his former employees are sure. He probably made a backup of the backup, too, for that is prudent practice in Gruber's business: creating the sort of slickly produced wedding-video packages that newlyweds pay upwards of \$3,000 each for.

Or, I should say, what *used* to be his business. Last week, [the Maryland attorney general's office announced that it is suing Gruber](#) — who also goes by the name Martin Andrews — and Blue Sky Films, his Maryland-based company. Dozens of couples say that around 2014, Gruber stopped returning emails and phone calls and that he has not delivered their promised highlight reels.

But there must be backups of the raw footage, right? A vast, unedited collection of vows, best-man speeches, first dances, cake-cuttings and bouquet tosses?

"Unless he took all of the drives and all the computers he has and tossed them in a Dumpster or put a corrupting virus on it . . . short of any of these things, the footage still exists," a former Blue Sky employee told me. (Because of the rancor involving Blue Sky, this person asked not to be named.)

It's those backup files that desperate couples are hoping to retrieve.

The clouds that bedevil Blue Sky Films bespeak the collapse of a once-mighty company. At one time, it was among the highest-rated wedding-video companies in the D.C. area, with kudos in *Washingtonian* ("Our top vote-getter," according to a 2007 story) and on the Knot, a wedding website.

Gruber employed about 15 people, who worked out of a well-equipped, high-tech space in downtown Silver Spring. It was demanding work. Weddings can be high-stress events for all concerned, including videographers, who strive to unobtrusively capture every important shot. They can't ask for a do-over.

Former Blue Sky employees described an annual crush of shooting from April to November, then nonstop editing in the winter to try to deliver the finished product. It sounds like sweatshop drudgery.

But it was drudgery clients paid top dollar for. The Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection said it has received 40 complaints from people who say they paid Blue Sky between \$2,000 and \$14,000 for work that was never delivered.

Eric Friedman, director of the county's consumer protection office, said his staff managed to finagle some raw wedding footage out of a Gruber family member who worked for Blue Sky. That's how **Mark Labus** of Darnestown, Md., was able to get unedited shots of daughter **Lindsey's** wedding.

"We looked at our film," Mark said. "The quality's good. We should be able to get it in the hands of some professional editor."

That will mean shelling out more money, but at least they'll have a record of the wedding. Since then, however, the flow of raw footage has stopped, Friedman said. Does it remain out there somewhere, on hard drives, servers and videotapes?

For some Blue Sky clients wedding videos are the last record they have of loved ones who have since died. Or the videos are the only way they could show a relative who was unable to attend what the celebration was like.

I tried to get in touch with Gruber, but Blue Sky's phone has been disconnected. Messages left with family members were not returned.

Michael Regina of Fairfax City, Va., paid Blue Sky \$4,800 to record his June 2015 wedding to his bride, **Audra**. He told me the outcome he'd like to see.

"I don't know if a judge can say, 'Martin, you have the video. . . . You have to sit in a prison cell and edit it until it's all done,' " Regina said. "That's what it comes down to. We want to see him produce the videos."

The Maryland attorney general's office has scheduled a July 21 hearing on the complaints against Gruber and Blue Sky at the Office of Administrative Hearings in Hunt Valley, in Baltimore County.

I asked how consumers can protect themselves against such outcomes. In an email, a spokeswoman with the attorney general's office recommended checking with the Better Business Bureau and other independent sources of customer reviews.

She also wrote: "Before signing a contract for services, ensure there is a clear stipulation on refunds and delivery of goods and services. If such a clause doesn't exist, ask the business owner to add in writing a stipulation that states whether the consumer will get any refunds or deposits returned."

Of course, even the most protective contract is of little value if the business owner simply drops off the face of the planet.