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PV SCHOOLS: Federal suit Family files \$17M federal suit against district

By Martin Wilbur

A family has filed a \$17 million federal civil rights lawsuit against the Putnam Valley School District in connection with the alleged sexual abuse of their daughter by a former teacher in a middle school classroom.

The suit, filed on behalf of Laura Bliss by her parents Peter and Lynn, also seeks compensation against longtime teacher Dennis Tave for engaging in improper sexual conduct and current and former administrators for failing to thoroughly investigate the matter.

Tave is accused of forcing the then 12-year-old girl to the floor of his classroom in February 2001 after the school day ended and engaging in inappropriate behavior, the document states.

Tave was permanently removed from the classroom in June 2003. The district reached an agreement with him where he was paid for the entire 2003-04 school year before retiring.

According to the suit on file in United States District Court in White Plains, Tave had "sexual relationships with and/or engaged in criminal and/or improper sexual conduct and/or inappropriate offenses" with Laura Bliss after she came to his classroom for assistance with school work.

The suit further alleges that Bliss, in the seventh grade at the time, fell unconscious and may have been drugged while the alleged assault took place. Bliss' attorney, Carolyn Mitner, was out of town until next week and could not be reached for comment, a member of the lawyer's office staff said. Peter Bliss, who controversially came forward in a January 2004 North County News interview to inform the public of his daughter's harrowing plight, declined to answer questions this week.

He did release a written statement, challenging the school district to release all records of the investigation if they attempt to disparage his daughter. "Any negative comments the district and its legal representative might have to make about our daughter and/or family regarding the assault upon her by Dennis Tave should be followed by a release of the full investigation completed by the school district that we participated in," the statement read.

"We came forward publicly to inform the community about this teacher three years ago this week because the school district did not. Now it is up to every student and parent to use that information as they wish."

District's lawyer responds

School district attorney Dennis O'Connor said he has not seen the suit, filed on December 28, but none of the parties have been served yet. O'Connor called the matter "a sad case" but said criminal investigations went nowhere and questioned why another attorney for the family didn't pursue the case.

"This young girl, in the sixth or seventh grade (at the time), I don't know whether it's a fantasy or not," O'Connor said. "I can say the D.A. did not take this case."

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Putnam County District Attorney Kevin Wright refused to comment this week about the investigation and why his office did not level charges.

A Sheriff's Department investigation concluded in 2003 with no charges being filed despite Tave failing a lie detector test administered in May of that year.

Bliss, who graduated another high school outside Putnam Valley last June, is now 18 years old. Her family said she is continuing her education but did not say where.

Suit outlines abuse

The lawsuit graphically recounted Tave's alleged sexual assault of Bliss while she was lying on the floor.

When the girl, who had passed out shortly after being given a cup of waters, regained consciousness, she found that her pants and underwear were pulled down midway on her thigh and was told to leave the room.

Shame and guilt prevented Bliss from coming forward. She suffered from anorexia nervosa, according to statements made by a social worker.

The suit charges further that the district "failed to thoroughly investigate the matter and failed to report and follow up with the New York State Education Department" until there was a conclusion.

In a supporting document attached to the action, a June 25, 2003 correspondence from interim superintendent Robert Pauline stated "there is reasonable suspicion" of child abuse following the district's investigation.

There will be a response to the suit, which lists five current and former administrators along with Tave and the district as defendants, within 20 days of the parties being served, O'Connor said.

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