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Former La Center students sue over long-ago sex abuse

Now adults, they claim school district was negligent

By Marissa Harshman
Columbian Staff Reporter

Monday, September 20, 2010

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La Center, WA — Two adults claiming to be the victims of sexual assault by their second-grade teacher at La Center Elementary School are now suing the school district for negligence.

The man and woman, who are not named in the complaint, claim they were sexually assaulted and molested by Robert David Ryan from Sept. 1, 1982, to April 5, 1983. They claim the assaults occurred in the classroom and argue the school district knew or should have known in exercising reasonable care that Ryan posed a risk to the children.

“How the school district couldn’t have known something bad was going on, I just find highly unlikely,” said Michael Beaty, one of the attorneys who filed the suit. “They should have known something.”

The complaint was filed in Clark County Superior Court on Monday. The lawsuit seeks damages in an amount to be determined at a trial, per state law.

Both adults have had significant consequences from their childhood abuse, such as trauma, early onset alcohol and drug abuse, chronic anxiety, long-term depression and repeated failures in relationships, Beaty and attorney Kelly Clark said in a news release. The man and woman will also incur costs in the future for counseling and psychiatric and psychological mental treatment, according to the lawsuit.

The school district, however, claims its staff acted swiftly upon learning of the allegations and cooperated with law enforcement in the investigation and prosecution of Ryan.

Ryan was charged with the sexual abuse of 14 of his students in 1983. The woman involved in the lawsuit was one of those students, Beaty said. The man in the lawsuit wants to protect his identity so Beaty would not comment as to whether he was one of the children as well.

Ryan pleaded guilty to two counts of indecent liberties and received a suspended sentence of 10 years in prison. He was sent to Western State Hospital to complete a sexual psychopathy program. Ryan told hospital staff he abused 25 children, and hospital staff said he showed no remorse or guilt for his actions, according to court records.

After a year at the hospital, Ryan requested to be removed from the program and his sentence suspension was revoked, according to court documents. Ryan’s last known address was in Missouri, Beaty said.

District’s actions

In 1983, the La Center School District superintendent and elementary school principal received a tip that a teacher had engaged in inappropriate conduct with a student. The superintendent immediately called the police and the principal monitored the teacher until law enforcement arrived, according to a statement from the school district.

Ryan was arrested within 24 hours of the initial report, and the district placed him on administrative leave during the investigation.

The district formally requested that the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction revoke Ryan's teaching certificate. OSPI permanently revoked the certificate and Ryan never returned to the La Center School District, according to the school district.

Current Superintendent Mark Mansell said in reviewing the district's response, it appears the superintendent and principal acted quickly upon learning of the abuse.

"These sorts of behaviors are unacceptable and from our initial look at it, I think the district acted swiftly," Mansell said Monday. "Bottom line is we care about our students, and it saddens me that the whole incident took place 30 years ago."

In the last year or so, the woman finally obtained the medical treatment and counseling needed to help her connect her issues to the abuse, Beaty said. That, he said, is why the man and woman, who are now in their 30s, waited 28 years to file the lawsuit.

"One of my clients, the female, has had mental health problems all of her life, going back to, more or less, when she was in second grade. But she never knew why," Beaty said. "It was only until very, very recently that she was able to connect the dots."

The district is currently investigating the complaints and contacting the insurance carriers that provided coverage during that period of time.

Marissa Harshman:

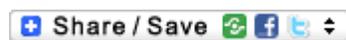
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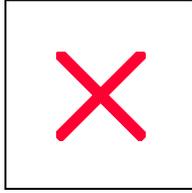
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