

Family of rancher killed in Oregon standoff sues

By Steven Dubois
Associated Press

PORTLAND (AP) — The family of an Arizona rancher who was killed by police during the armed occupation of a national wildlife refuge in Oregon alleged in a U.S. lawsuit Friday that he was “deliberately executed by a preplanned government ambush.”

The wrongful-death lawsuit filed in Portland on the second anniversary of Robert “LaVoy” Finicum’s death seeks at least \$5 million in damages for his widow and each of their 12 children. The United States is listed as a defendant, along with the FBI, Oregon State Police, Gov. Kate Brown and others.

FBI spokeswoman Beth Anne Steele said the agency does not comment on pending litigation. Representatives for the governor and state police did not immediately return messages seeking comment.

Finicum served as a spokesman for the armed group led by Ammon and Ryan Bundy that occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016 to oppose federal control of land in the U.S. West and the imprisonment of two ranchers.

Investigators determined that state troopers were justified in shooting Finicum three times in the back after he exited his vehicle at a police roadblock, put his hands in the air and then reached toward a handgun in his inner jacket pocket.

The investigation also found that an FBI agent at the scene failed to disclose that he fired two rounds that missed Finicum. The agent, W. Joseph Astarita, has pleaded not guilty to federal charges of making false statements and obstruction of justice. He is listed as a defendant in the lawsuit.

The complaint compares the shooting of Finicum to the high-profile shooting of a North Korean defector in November 2017. It notes that the North Korean man survived and made it across the border to a friendlier government on the other side.

“The story was captivating, because in the American psyche, the idea of being shot in the back by your own government for trying to cross a border is unthinkable,” the lawsuit said.

It claims Finicum was shot “assassination style” while trying to cross from Harney County into Grant County for a meeting with a sheriff who was sympathetic to the ranchers’ cause.

Dozens of people took over the remote refuge in southeastern Oregon from Jan. 2 to Feb. 11, 2016. They were allowed to come and go for several weeks as authorities tried to avoid bloodshed seen in past standoffs at Waco, Texas, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

But authorities moved in Jan. 26 when key standoff leaders left the refuge for a community meeting in neighboring Grant County, pulling over two vehicles and arresting the occupiers inside.

Finicum, 54, was driving one vehicle. Video taken by a passenger showed the occupants panicking after authorities stopped the truck.

With his window rolled down, Finicum shouted at officers: “Shoot me, just shoot me! Put the bullet through me.”

Finicum then sped off, coming to a roadblock and plowing into a snowbank.

The complaint says more than a dozen current and former Arizona officials wrote a letter to Oregon’s governor, asking her to conduct a more transparent investigation into what happened next.

“Defendant has refused,” according to the lawsuit.

SUICIDE: Parents’ involvement is critical to awareness

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High School to follow later.

The community event, scheduled for 6 to 7:30 p.m. Monday, February 5, at Sisters High School is designed in part to expand the care and connect concept to the entire local population. In addition, presenters will share pertinent information that includes real statistics, warning signs, action steps, and resources.

The school assemblies will take place the following day at a later date, still to be determined. Parents will be welcome to attend as well.

Among the presenters are Jason and Kristy Winebarger, whose 12-year-old son Jacob died by suicide here in Central Oregon in January 2016, when he was a seventh-grader at Skyview Middle School in Bend. In the time since their son’s death, the Winebargers have made themselves available to schools and other organizations to support suicide prevention education.

Additionally, school counselors, health teachers, school nurses and other mental-health professionals will take part in the presentations.

Oregon actually remains among the states in America with the highest suicide rates, and in the past two months at least two students have died by suicide in Central Oregon, bringing the reality close to home.

“Our aim is to do all we can so that parents and students themselves can understand more about how to prevent suicide,” said Heather Johnson, a health teacher at Sisters High School. Johnson collects data from students

each year through her classroom and with the Oregon Healthy Teens survey, and the statistics are sobering.

One of the statistics from last year’s ninth- and eleventh-graders at Sisters High School indicated that about a quarter (25 percent) of students had either experienced suicidal thoughts or actually made attempts at suicide.

Knowing when students are struggling is a key part of prevention, which is one of the reasons Johnson is working to expand a concept she calls “Care and Connect.”

Students in Johnson’s classes are taught about the power of individual students taking action when they notice a friend or classmate who exhibits warning signs, which can include withdrawal, talk of feeling depressed, change in behavior/manner, drug and alcohol use and difficult life experiences.

One simple way of thinking of warning signs includes the three “H”s, which stand for feeling helpless, hopeless and/or hapless.

“We use Care and Connect cards that students can fill out anonymously that allow them to communicate their concerns about students they are concerned about, including themselves. I then turn those over to a counselor or other professional support staff to follow up on,” Johnson said.

The Care and Connect

cards help to overcome the “code of silence” that tends to be pervasive in our society, especially among teens, according to Johnson.

“Kids tend to think they are protecting their friends by keeping secrets, or they think that if they speak up their friends will be angry with them,” said Johnson. “We are working to help students understand that truly caring means urging friends to get help or to tell a trusted adult who can offer proper support.”

The Winebargers have wisdom to share with other parents, and students as well, that they truly hope will help families avoid the tragedy they have experienced.

In an interview by KTVZ in September 2016, Jason Winebarger said, “What we’ve been through, we want to prevent anyone else from having to go through that. You don’t want to be a member of this club.”

According to Johnson, the Care and Connect assemblies will allow attendees to learn more about local resources, but even more importantly, how each person, as a friend, neighbor, classmate or family member can make a pivotal difference in preventing suicide from happening.

“The bottom line is that we have to look out for each other and be able to recognize when those around us need immediate care,” she said.

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