

Salem wildlife center fights eviction

Whitney Woodworth
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A longtime Salem wildlife center — which intakes hundreds of skunks, eagles, raccoons and other local wild animals a year — is fighting eviction from its current home in south Salem and accusing its landlords in court of fraud.

Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center is one of the few places in western Oregon that can provide a home for thousands of injured and orphaned animals year-round, said Mary Bliss, who founded the nonprofit in 2005.

In early 2020, the wildlife center relocated its worksite to the property on Jackson Hill Road South in south Salem. Leaders entered into a 25-year lease with landlords Dean and Amy Yeager, and paid more than \$30,000 to the couple for building renovations on what would become the wildlife center.

R. Grant Cook, an attorney for Turtle Ridge, said the landlords then had a change of heart.

"With an incomplete building renovation leaving (a key) structure uninhabitable, the landlords decided they wanted the wildlife refuge off of their property," Cook said.

Dueling lawsuits

The Yeagers attempted to raise the rent and allowed a cattle operation onto the property that significantly disrupted the center's operations and distressed the animals, according to a lawsuit filed by Turtle Ridge against their landlords.

"What my client has had to endure from the Yeagers over the past months despite the incredible work it does, I believe, is unconscionable," Cook said.

Marion County Judge Channing Bennett ordered the Yeagers to pay the wildlife center \$60,000 after the couple failed to appear in court. But the money is not yet guaranteed — Cook said his clients will likely file an amended complaint and that the legal case is far from over.

Cook said the case will likely be reinstated.

After months of disputes, the Yeagers brought their own legal action to evict the wildlife center.

The eviction lawsuit accused the wildlife center of violating the terms of the lease by performing "illegal veterinarian work," doing electrical work on the property and disrupting the "quiet and peaceful enjoyment of the Landlord and other tenants on the property."

Officials with Turtle Ridge refuted the Yeagers' accusations and said in court filings the landlord's conduct toward them constituted "fraud and misrepresentation."

The eviction case remains open.

A history of legal troubles

Amy Yeager initially responded to a request for comment from the Statesman Journal and said she was preparing a "list of facts" but failed to send the



Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center has been battling with their landlords over leased property on Jackson Hill Road south of Salem. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL



A bald eagle rescue at Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center.

TURTLE RIDGE WILDLIFE CENTER



A skunk being fed at Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center.

TURTLE RIDGE WILDLIFE CENTER

or respond to follow-up requests for comment.

Court records show a long history of litigation, bankruptcy and revoked licensing involving Dean and Amy Yeager.

Multiple lawsuits have been filed against the couple and Dean Yeager over the years.

Dean Yeager has been sued for medical malpractice and agreed in 2008 to permanently surrender his medical license and never reapply for an Oregon medical license after the Oregon Medical Board proposed taking disciplinary action against him for repeated acts of negligence and unprofessional conduct.

The Yeagers previously operated Jackstone Inc., a construction business, but they surrendered their license and the company is now inactive.

The Construction Contractors Board reports almost \$30,000 in unpaid claims by the company to homeowners, suppliers and subcontractors and \$1,985 in unpaid civil penalties.

Dean Yeager filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy in March. Court records show he previously filed for bankruptcy in 2010.

Cook said the Yeagers initially wanted to create a wildlife center on the land and use the wildlife venue as a selling point. After the wedding venue plans fell through, their relationship with their tenants soured, he said.

Social media indicates the Yeagers currently operate an Airbnb on the property. Their residence in court records is also listed as being on Jackson Hill Road SE.

The properties, tucked in the farmland south of Salem, feature a main house and a collection of buildings, including the Turtle Ridge main building.

"We cannot allow such reprehensible conduct by landlords to go unchecked," Cook said. "The biggest tragedy here is that the refuge is forced to expend precious time and limited resources toward fighting this legal action brought by the Yeagers, with the victims being the wildlife patients."

Seeking a new home

Bliss said she was unaware of the Yeager's financial troubles.

"They live in a financial mess," she said. "We weren't aware of the bankruptcies filed. At the beginning, there was so much enthusiasm. This is just crushing us."

She said because of the instability, the center was not able to fundraise as usual.

As a result of the dispute, Turtle Ridge might be in a need of a new property. Bliss said an ideal property would be five to 10 acres zoned for farming, agricultural or exclusive farm use and with housing onsite for the director to provide 24-hour care.

Bliss hopes someone with this land could donate a stable property to the center, similar to what a resident did for the Cascades Raptor Center in Eugene.

How to help

More than 3,000 animals came into Turtle Ridge's care last year, brought in by residents, veterinarians, law enforcement and others.

The center is permitted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife. They are able to release the bulk of the animals back into the wild.

Some non-releasable animals become part of their educational program.

Those who find an animal in need can contact the center's helpline at 503-540-8664.

Those interested in donating property can contact Bliss at 503-362-9016 or Director Jessie Gill at 503-560-9035.

Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center is also accepting financial donations.

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at umwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com, call 503-910-6616 or follow on Twitter @wmwoodworth.



Justin and Hope welcome Sophie Maxx Sramek at 4:18 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2021. She was the first baby born at Salem Hospital. COURTESY OF SALEM HEALTH



A team at Salem Health's Family Birth Center welcomes the first baby of 2021 - Sophie Maxx Sramek - at 4:18 a.m. Jan. 1. From left to right: Registered Nurse Alyssa Rendon, Dr. Jodell Boyle and Dr. Robert Harder. COURTESY OF SALEM HEALTH

Babies

Continued from Page 1A

year. Sophie's middle name comes from both sides of the family — after dad's great grandfather, Max, and mom's grandmother, Maxine, hence, the two XXs.

The hospital sent the family home with a gift basket filled with toys, supplies and coupons. It weighed more than Sophie did.

While Sophie is in good health, one family member seemed concerned.

"I'm a little afraid now," older brother Leo said.

When mom asked the 5-year-old why, he said: "cuz I think she's gonna be the new boss."

Silverton's first baby was a girl, too, and COVID-19 restrictions put a crimp on photo opportunities for parents Maria Avalos and Gilberto Coria.

They welcomed their daughter Kehlani Marie Coria at 11:31 a.m. Jan. 1 at Legacy Silverton Medical Center.

"Due to COVID, they aren't taking (newborn) photos anymore," Avalos said. "They weren't able to take pictures of us since nurses can't be in the room as much."

Dad did get some video of the birth, which mom never expected to happen so quickly.

Avalos checked in at about 6 a.m. and heard staff mentioning she could deliver the hospital's first New Year's baby. She had a feeling it might not happen

until the following day, but Kehlani was eager to arrive.

She weighed 6 pounds, 12 ounces.

She and her parents went home with two gift bags from the hospital, one containing diapers and the other newborn essentials including onesies, mittens and toys.

Avalos has a different set of challenges at home this time around.

was just me and her. Now it's me, the baby and a toddler."

Capi Lynn is the Statesman Journal's news columnist. Contact her at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.