

Dairy

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A local business member she had been working with promised to take care of everything while she went through chemo and radiation.

Blanchard trusted Bruce Taylor — enough that she never put anything in writing. Taylor is a familiar name in Salem-Keizer business circles and the former publisher of the Salem Business Journal.

A Statesman Journal investigation revealed the restaurant under Taylor's management racked up \$20,000 in back lease payments and thousands more in unpaid utilities and other bills from July 2020 through August 2021. For months, Taylor also publicly represented himself as the new owner.

Blanchard's son, Bobby Miller, stepped in after becoming suspicious, and then literally discovered a bucket full of unpaid bills.

"It's hard to believe it happened and that someone would do that, but my mother trusted him," Miller said. "He took advantage of my mom."

Blanchard, 74, was left with nothing when she sold the business in September. The proceeds barely covered the debt.

Miller said he also learned Taylor allegedly accepted a \$40,000 check for the sale of the business. The potential buyer told the Statesman Journal he found out Taylor was not the owner before making a second payment and has since hired an attorney.

The attorney declined to speak to the Statesman Journal for this story.

Taylor, 65, denied the allegations in a March 9 call with the Statesman Journal. He said he bought the restaurant from Blanchard and she repossessed it "because she didn't think I paid her enough money."

When asked if he had a record of the sale, he said he did but refused to provide any documents to the newspaper. He said the real estate broker at John L. Scott could confirm the sale.

John L. Scott told the Statesman Journal no one in its office ever handled a sale between Taylor and Blanchard.

Taylor's story changed during the phone call with the Statesman Journal. At one point, he said he came in as an equal partner in the restaurant. He grew increasingly angry at the questions being asked and made insults about Blanchard. He said he has cancer, too.

He eventually asked that questions be emailed to him for his attorney to answer. Neither Taylor nor his attorney responded to the emailed questions.

Cancer diagnosis puts business at risk

Taylor first approached Blanchard before the pandemic struck, wanting to be involved in the operation of Court Street Dairy Lunch. She said he told her he wanted to learn the ropes, be partners, maybe even find a potential buyer.

She had known Taylor for years. His Salem Business Journal office was across the street on the third floor of the Reed Opera House, and Blanchard said he ate at the diner at least once a week.

His offer to help gave her hope that she might be able to finally retire.

Blanchard said the restaurant was holding its own before the pandemic, but it closed in March 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions.

Court Street Dairy reopened for to-go orders in April, then for indoor dining in May, and Taylor was alongside Blanchard learning how to run the restaurant. She never paid him.

As the business was getting back to normal, Blanchard was diagnosed in July with pancreatic cancer.

She said Taylor promised he would take care of the day-to-day operations for her while she pursued treatment.

Blanchard said they never discussed what that meant exactly, and nothing was put in writing. She said no money was exchanged and there was no discussion about finances, including whether Taylor would be paid or how revenue would be handled.

But she trusted him, she said, not just to pay bills but keep her informed of all business matters.

Taylor told the Statesman Journal he believed he was purchasing the restaurant.

Blanchard became consumed by doctors, chemo and radiation appointments. She never asked anyone else to verify that Taylor was making the monthly lease payments and paying the utility bills.

At one point, worried about the fate of the restaurant if she died, Blanchard asked Taylor to make sure her two sons each received a share of any sale. She said he told her he would, but her sons wanted something in writing.

Miller said he tried to meet with Taylor to discuss details, but Taylor canceled scheduled meetings twice, assuring Miller he would have something written up. It never happened, Miller said.

They eventually met at the diner, and Miller said Taylor sat down with a blank piece of paper and took notes as if they were discussing it for the first time.

When Miller left, he knew he had to have an uncomfortable conversation with his mom.

He started asking questions. She

didn't have answers.

Taylor builds connections in community

Taylor moved to Salem around 2005 and launched in June of that year the Salem Business Journal, a free monthly publication showcasing local businesses.

"Join Salem's top business leaders in welcoming this vital new link to the mid-Willamette Valley business community," is how Taylor started his publisher's letter in Volume 1, Issue 1.

The letter was accompanied by a photograph of him in a jacket and tie.

Taylor entrenched himself in the business community. He was a member of the Salem/Keizer Business Alliance and was involved with ShowBiz, the annual trade show once organized by the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce.

He built connections with movers and shakers, producing a regular periodical that provided a platform for businesses to advertise and business leaders to connect.

Taylor eventually launched other publications, including Salem Magazine and The Local.

"He was old school in the way that he did business, and a lot of people liked that," said Jonathan Castro Monroy, who once was a contributing writer to the Salem Business Journal and recently purchased it. "He always tried to support small businesses."

The Statesman Journal discovered a list of judgments and liens against Taylor, stretching across 30 years and three states — Oregon, California and Nevada. Some records list his full name as Perry Bruce Taylor, but Taylor always went by Bruce in Salem.

He was a defendant in at least four small claims lawsuits in Marion County Circuit Court, according to court records. One was filed by a billing collection agency, and two by people who worked for him. The plaintiffs sought judgments from about \$400 to \$1,100.

One plaintiff did graphic design for the publication. She told the Statesman Journal their working relationship had soured and when she submitted her invoice. She informed him it would be her last. She said Taylor was a no-show for the court date and never paid the \$1,120 default judgment entered in December 2005.

She let it go, but an automotive shop owner in California has not. He has a lien against Taylor from 1999 for more than \$1,000 of work done for Taylor. With interest, the lien is now for more than double that. It has been renewed multiple times, most recently in 2016, and is on record through at least 2026.

The list of judgments and liens includes three federal tax liens from the 1990s, for a total of more than \$25,000 that has been released, meaning the liens were either paid off or the IRS decided not to pursue collection.

Questions of ownership surface

Blanchard was absent from the restaurant much of the time during her cancer treatment.

She said Taylor once brought breakfast to her home, and he visited her in the hospital when she had complications.

She thought he was kind and had her best interests at heart.

"He's good at manipulating people," Blanchard said.

Ben Punley, a friend of Taylor's and former business partner with Salem Business Journal, said Taylor told him he was making payments to buy the restaurant for \$75,000. Taylor told the Statesman Journal he paid \$40,000 to buy the restaurant.

Punley said he had no reason to not believe him, and Taylor was at the restaurant all the time.

"If he was trying to scam somebody, he wouldn't have worked that many hours," said Punley, who bought 50% of the Salem Business Journal from Taylor in late 2020. "You don't work that hard if you're trying to scam somebody."

Taylor told many people in the community he was the owner of Court Street Dairy. He even had business cards made.

He told the Statesman Journal during interviews last year for two separate stories that he was the restaurant's owner. Online Oregon Business Registry documents checked at the time to confirm his statement appeared to verify that.

Taylor was listed as the "Registered Agent" in the database managed by the Oregon Secretary of State's Office. He still is.

Court Street Dairy's business name had expired, which Blanchard was unaware of. The renewal notice sent by the Secretary of State's Office on Nov. 11, 2020, went to the restaurant.

Her registration became inactive Feb. 25, 2021, making the business name available to anyone.

Taylor filed an application for registration June 9, according to registry records. Blanchard said she did not authorize him.

"To me, it's just mindboggling that he was able to go in and put the license in his name because it was expired," her son said.

Taylor's electronic signature on the registration follows a four-sentence declaration including this: "Making false statements in this document is

against the law and may be penalized by fines, imprisonment, or both."

A representative from the Secretary of State's Office said there is no process to verify renewal information and reports of disputed ownership are rare.

"Our office is ministerial, and any conflicts are addressed as a civil matter," Jaime Weddle-Jones of the Corporate Division wrote in an email to the Statesman Journal.

The Statesman Journal has corrected both stories that inaccurately mentioned Taylor as the owner of the diner.

Dreams of selling, expanding business

Taylor had grand plans for Court Street Dairy Lunch.

He told a Statesman Journal reporter how he wanted to buy the Willamette Queen sternwheeler and make it an extension of the restaurant. He discussed options with a local mortgage broker, including his interest in buying the building where the diner is located, even though it wasn't for sale.

He previously discussed with Blanchard the idea of bringing in others to support or buy the restaurant and reached out to at least one prominent resident in town, asking for financial help to keep the restaurant afloat.

Taylor told Blanchard Salem-Keizer Public Schools was interested in buying the business. The district would use the diner as a training facility for culinary arts programs, he told her.

She said no one from the district ever reached out to her to discuss the possibility, even though multiple times Taylor said he would arrange a meeting.

"I kept getting my hopes up, wondering when it was going to happen," Blanchard said. "I'd call him, and he'd say we had to postpone. There was always something, an excuse, a reason it didn't go through."

The school district confirmed two individuals who indicated they had a relationship with the owner of Court Street Dairy approached a staff member. It is unknown if one of them was Taylor. An "off-the-cuff" conversation about a restaurant partnership took place.

The idea appealed to the district, but the individuals never followed up.

In late spring 2021, Taylor allegedly arranged for the sale of the restaurant. Don Repplinger wanted to buy the diner for his wife, who had restaurant experience.

Repplinger, in his early 80s and from a generation where a person's word and a handshake meant something, said he wrote Taylor a \$40,000 check and it was cashed. The Statesman Journal re-

quested but never saw any bank records.

The deal began to unravel when Blanchard stopped by the diner one day, which she sometimes did after chemo appointments. She introduced herself to someone as the owner, which Repplinger's wife overheard.

That led to questions, and Repplinger said Taylor eventually admitted he did not own the restaurant.

Son gets suspicious, wants answers

After Miller's conversation with Taylor, he told his mom she needed to meet with Taylor at the restaurant and find out what was going on.

Blanchard and Taylor sat down in a booth in June and, after introducing herself to a new server as the owner, she couldn't believe Taylor's reaction. She said he claimed he was the owner now.

She said she was shocked and confused. She didn't know what to say, so she got up and left.

Blanchard said Taylor handed her a \$250 check during that visit, although she said she didn't know what it was for. She never cashed the check, which was from an account of the Salem Business Journal.

She said that was the only time he ever gave her a check. He occasionally would give her cash from the restaurant, \$100 here and there. She estimated he gave her about \$1,100 from November 2020 to May 2021.

Taylor repeatedly reported to her that business was down and no money was coming in, Blanchard said.

Blanchard returned to the diner a week or so after their conversation about ownership, accompanied by a friend.

She said Taylor again was adamant about being the owner and became defensive when she asked what made him think he owned the restaurant. They were seated next to each other in a booth, and she remembers him grabbing her shoulders and physically turning her toward him.

At the time, Blanchard said she didn't consider the move aggressive. The friend asked a couple of questions before they left, and Blanchard said Taylor never did try to explain his claim.

Blanchard again left with no answers.

Her son wishes he would have stepped in sooner. But his mom trusted Taylor, and it was her business.

Miller showed up unannounced at the restaurant on Aug. 25 to confront

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