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national news

Under the gun

*Already the subject of a recall effort, Coroner Dexter Amend
now faces a lawsuit*

by Inga Sorensen

Dexter Amend, the Spokane County coroner who several months ago suggested there was a link between a Spokane girl's murder and homosexuality—because she had previously been sodomized—is facing a \$2 million lawsuit that alleges he went “beyond all bounds of decency” when he demanded an autopsy on a man who died of AIDS complications.

The lawsuit claims that Amend delayed the cremation and memorial service for 39-year-old Curtis Babcock, a gay Spokane cosmetologist who died Nov. 8, because he was trying to link Babcock's death to sodomy. Babcock's relatives say that Amend compounded their grief by delaying his cremation “and trying to use an autopsy to prove homosexuality led to his death.”

The lawsuit comes on the heels of yet another controversy involving Amend, who was recently accused of asking the family of 11-year-old fire victim Jeffrey Himes if the boy masturbated or had sex with other boys. Autopsy results show Himes died of smoke inhalation.

That incident shocked many, and prompted state lawmakers to introduce a bill that would allow Spokane County to replace the embattled coroner, who is elected, with an appointed medical examiner. An elected coroner cannot be fired, can only be recalled by voters, and does not have to have any medical expertise. A medical examiner routinely is appointed and must be trained in death investigation.

The Babcock autopsy battle, meanwhile, began when Georgia Salcido, Babcock's sister, attempted to pick up her brother's ashes at the Hazen & Jaeger Funeral Home two days after his death. Babcock, who learned he was HIV positive 14 years ago, had made plans to be cremated.

The embalmer, however, told Salcido the cremation had been delayed because Amend wanted an autopsy. Babcock's body had been removed from the morgue under Amend's authorization.

Forensic pathologist George Lindholm in turn refused Amend's request, saying Babcock's condition was “well-diagnosed” and not “sudden and unexpected,” and thus did not warrant an autopsy.

Lindholm also called Amend's request an unnecessary invasion of privacy and described the coroner's action as a “public witch hunt.”

Furthermore, Babcock's doctor, Daniel Coulston, says Amend questioned him about whether his client was a “practicing sodomist.”

“I think he's got his own personal agenda—his campaign against homosexuality,” Coulston told *The (Spokane) Spokesman-Review*.

Babcock's body was eventually returned to the funeral home—and six days after her brother died, Salcido received his ashes.

In light of that episode, Coulston submitted a complaint to the Spokane County Medical Society; the office forwarded it to a state agency that is already investigating Amend at Gov. Mike Lowry's request.

Last September, Lowry called for an investigation after Amend suggested there was a connection between homosexuality and the murder of 9-year-old Rachel Carver, who had previously been sodomized by a male family member.

Social service agencies in both Washington and California reportedly had extensive files on the girl's abuse. Her father served time for abusing her, and the girl's uncle has pleaded guilty to the murder. At the time of her death she was living

The Spokesman-Review says supporters were “hailing him as a hero for his anti-gay stand. Some even wanted him to run for mayor.”

with her uncle, a convicted sex offender, and his wife in north Spokane.

The Carver controversy sparked a recall campaign, which is currently tied up in the courts. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that an estimated 360 people rallied in Amend's defense last August when his comments about Carver came under fire. *The Spokesman-Review* says supporters were “hailing him as a hero for his anti-gay stand. Some even wanted him to run for mayor.”

Despite that support, an estimated 140 Spokane physicians have signed a petition calling for Amend's removal, and the Spokane Human Rights Commission has called for his resignation.

Additionally, an editorial in the local newspaper states: “No one, including those who share Amend's aversion toward the gay lifestyle, can defend an unprofessional obsession that violates distraught people who are struggling to cope with death.”

“Put yourself in the survivors' shoes. How'd you like a strange man barging into your life after a loved one's death, asking about his or her sex habits?”

It concludes: “God have mercy on you if the coroner comes calling.”

Saadat joins NGLTF board

Portland activist Kathleen Saadat was appointed to the board of directors of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force at the organization's January board meeting. Saadat was one of four new members to join the board. The other three are Dick Nathan of Los Angeles and San Francisco; Kenneth Collins of Long Beach, Calif.; and Joseph Hall of Charleston, S.C.

Saadat has been active in progressive and lesbian and gay politics in Oregon for the past 20 years. She served as the governor's affirmative action of-

ficer under former Gov. Neil Goldschmidt. She was a member of the steering committee of the No on 9 campaign in 1992 and was active in 1994's No on 13

campaign. She is co-chair of the Portland Rainbow Coalition. During the 1992 campaign to defeat Ballot Measure 9, Saadat coordinated the formation of African Americans Voting No on Nine, which later became African Americans for Human Rights. She has received numerous awards for her activism.

Saadat is a consultant, trainer and speaker on diversity and other issues.

Kristine Chatwood



Kathleen Saadat

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEINER