

Explosives incident linked to Valdez case

Tests confirmed strange stick was a 'C4' bomb-making like substance

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
EO Media Group

CATHLAMET, Wash. — Newly released police records show that a bizarre July bomb scare in Wahkiakum County was linked to the case of Sam Valdez.

The former Altoona Pillar Rock Road resident was sentenced this month to nearly 21 years in prison for plotting to kill his former wife, burning down his neighbors' home, and unlawfully manufacturing large quantities of marijuana oil at his home.

The new documents show police suspected Valdez of at least one additional crime that he was never charged with.

Frightening discovery

On the morning of July 20, a woman — whose name was not released at the time —

drove to Cathlamet to deliver a strange package to the Wahkiakum County Sheriff's Office. She gave the deputies a roughly one-pound brick of silver-gray material, covered in a paper and wax wrapper that was printed with Cyrillic writing. She said she found the brick in the shed of her vacation cabin, located in another county.

Suspecting that it was a form of dangerous plastic explosive, Sheriff Mark Howie called the Portland office of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Washington State Patrol bomb squad.

At the time, Howie and Wahkiakum County Prosecutor Daniel Bigelow said the woman brought it from out of town because it was likely connected to a significant local criminal case. However, Bigelow and Howie would not say which crime they referred to, or who was involved, because the case was still open. Under Washington law, police do not have to share information that could compromise active investigations.

"I just can't say anything about this. Any little thing



Natalie St. John/EO Media Group

Samuel Fredrick Valdez, 64, consulted with his attorney, Wayne Fricke in February after learning that he had been convicted of murder solicitation, arson, marijuana delivery, and marijuana possession with intent to manufacture or deliver.

could just completely change the destiny of this case," Howie explained in August when a Chinook Observer reporter asked if it was related to Valdez's early July arrest.

Links to Valdez

Now that Valdez, 64, looks likely to spend most or all of his remaining years in a state prison, police appear to have decided there is little point in investigating other potential charges against him. At the

conclusion of the March sentencing hearing, Bigelow said the Sheriff's Office had officially closed the investigation, and provided a Washington State Patrol incident report and lab analysis that had previously been off-limits to reporters.

According to a trooper's August report, the woman who found the brick of explosive plastic was Elizabeth Robbins, Valdez's former wife, and the would-be victim of

his murder scheme. Robbins told police that she discovered the suspicious object at a property she and Valdez had owned together. She found it stuffed inside of a duct that had recently been repaired or installed, and decided to call the police after using the Internet to look up some of the words on the packaging.

From Russia, with(out) love

During field tests in July, the bomb squad could not identify the substance, though the look and smell led police to believe that it was one of several malleable explosives manufactured in former Eastern Bloc countries.

Later that evening, a special agent with ATF told the Washington State Patrol and local police that he had consulted with experts at the ATF National Center for Explosives Training and Research. According to the report, the experts "believed the block might be Russian TNT."

About a week later, forensic scientists at the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab in Tacoma found that the brick contained three chemicals,

that, when combined, form a powerful explosive that can be detonated with a blasting cap.

According to the report, "When a portion of the material was exposed to a flame it ignited with a quick white flash which is consistent with an explosive mixture."

Suspected, but never proven

The report does not say where the explosive originated, or how a person in Washington acquired it.

It is clear that police suspected Valdez of placing the explosive in the shed — Deputy Prosecutor Sue Bauer, who led the state's case against Valdez, asked to have the brick tested for fingerprints, and he is listed as the "suspect" on the lab report.

The forensics team used high-tech fingerprinting techniques to try and figure out who had handled the explosive. However, the results were inconclusive. The malleable wax surface of the packaging made testing difficult, and the team did not find any fingerprints that were "of value for further analysis."



Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Levi Read

The 623-foot grain carrier Sparna, after briefly running aground and sustaining hull damage Monday, was escorted towards a pier north of Kalama, Wash., Wednesday. The Sparna suffered multiple fractures along its hull, but no pollution was reported.

Damaged grain carrier escorted upriver to Kalama

The Daily Astorian

KALAMA, Wash. — The vessel Sparna, which grounded Monday on the Columbia River near Cathlamet, was escorted to a dock north of Kalama Wednesday.

The U.S. Coast Guard, in charge of the incident command, provided a safety escort, with support from two tugs, the Columbia River Pilots and an environmental cleanup vessel from National Response Corp. following behind.

"The main objectives during the transit was to maintain the safety of the Sparna crew, maintain a safe navigational channel throughout the transit and respond as necessary to environmental concerns," said Cmdr. Jonathan Hellberg, incident commander. "The successful transit was a unified team effort, and

we are very pleased with the outcome."

The cause of the grounding is still under investigation, but the Sparna has not been reported as leaking. The vessel was outbound with more than 250,000 gallons of fuel and a load of grain near the Julia Butler Hansen Wildlife Refuge when it ran aground. The vessel's hull sustained significant damage, including a 15-by-5-foot fracture with a boulder lodged inside.

A 100-yard safety zone surrounding the vessel was put in place by Capt. Daniel Travers, commander of Sector Columbia River and the captain of the port, throughout the transit, which lasted from about noon to 6 p.m. The vessel was docked near metal supplier Steelscape, Inc., north of Kalama and will undergo a damage assessment and repairs.

Rescuers suspend search for skipper of capsized boat

Associated Press

COOS BAY — U.S. Coast Guard officials say the search for a captain who disappeared when a boat with a load of fish overturned has been suspended.

The search ended at 7 p.m. Wednesday after 11 hours.

Coast Guard spokeswoman Rachel Steiner said the Patty AJ capsized Wednesday while making a turn in the channel of Coos Bay. Three of the four people aboard the vessel reached safety while a Coast Guard helicopter, two

boats and a dive squad scrambled to find the captain.

Ronald Silva owns and usually skips the Patty AJ. On Wednesday, however, he turned it over to someone else.

Silva told the Coos Bay World that the man usually skips another boat: "But it went crabbing today and he doesn't like crabbing, so he decided to help us out."

The Bandon and Airport Dive Team finished their search of the Patty AJ late in the morning. Diver Bob Hood said the boat was on its side and completely flooded.

Finding lifelong friends at Seaside's FosterClub

By KATHERINE LACAZE
For EO Media Group

SEASIDE — As FosterClub celebrates its 16th birthday, a few former foster youth shared what the organization means to them and what it has to offer for other children going through the system.

"It's that sense that no matter where I go, I have somebody, I have a connection," said Marcus Brown, a former foster youth who serves as the office and logistics administrator for FosterClub. Once you join the club, he added, you are always in the club.

Lydia Sterba, 26, of Seaside, described the Seaside-based nonprofit organization as "a community of people to kind of help others progress" by sharing experiences and learning from one another.

A 'better life'

Celeste Bodner founded FosterClub in 1999. After becoming a foster mother herself, she realized the need to promote self-advocacy, access to information and involvement in the foster care system. FosterClub's stated goal is to lead the efforts of young people in and from foster care to become connected and represented "so they can realize their personal potential and contribute to a better life for their peers."

During the past decade and a half, Bodner has seen what started as a simple idea flourish into an entity that is perpetually validated by the youth who get involved and become empowered to achieve their best.

"It's super rewarding," she said.

Not to say the task has been easy. Bodner admits the 16 years since FosterClub's creation have been felt for the many labors of love that accompanied them.

"It's a lot of work to start a national organization from the ground up," she said. When she looks at the young leaders who have emerged from the organization, however, "it's definitely all worth it."

System effects

Brown, Sterba and two other former foster youth discussed how being in foster care not only affected their

physical living situations, but also their education, relationships and other aspects of life.

The speakers' experiences with placements varied. Brown had two placements, spending five years in the foster care system in Michigan before finding his "forever home," into which he was adopted. On the other hand, Charlie McNeely, of Portland, went through numerous different placements, including homes and shelters; so many, she said, "I stopped keeping track."

Being transferred so frequently from place to place affected her education, she said.

"I remember every new placement was a new school," McNeely said. "I fell behind, of course."

In addition to having to adjust to new facilities, teachers and classes, some of her credits wouldn't transfer as she moved schools.

Ashley Foster-French felt education provided consistency and a way to gain independence. She graduated high school at 16, but then, she struggled to make education a top priority.

Sterba went to college after aging out of the system, but found it hard to be in the collegiate setting without the family support other students had.

"It was difficult because other kids had connections to home and check-ins," she said.



Katherine Lacaze/For EO Media Group

During an open house March 12 at Broadway Middle School, staff and community members sang "Happy Birthday" to celebrate FosterClub's 16th birthday.



Katherine Lacaze/For EO Media Group

Former foster youth Charlie McNeely, Marcus Brown, Lydia Sterba and Ashley Foster-French share their personal narratives during an open house March 12 for FosterClub, a Seaside-based national nonprofit that recently celebrated its 16th birthday. During the event, guests learned more about the organization, foster care and how to help foster youth through mentoring and volunteering.

She asked to continue with care until she was 19, the only extension permitted at the time. Now youth can opt to stay in foster care until age 21.

Foster-French also felt she was unprepared for exiting out of care and made mistakes. That's where FosterClub came in. She enrolled in the very first All-Star internship program in 2004

and now is the organization's training and education manager.

Sterba, who also was an intern at one point and now works for the state's independent living system, said FosterClub "opened this door to me," giving her a passion to help other youth.

To learn more about FosterClub, visit fosterclub.com or call 503-717-1552.

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