

# ABUSE: Family took possession of man's assets, including home

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Avilas are counter-suing Steele for more than \$1.1 million, including for loss of consortium. They claim Steele assaulted Elizabeth Avila, which caused a loss of "sexual attentions and affection" for her husband.

The *East Oregonian* interviewed the Avilas and Steele for this story, along with Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus, chief deputy district attorney Jacklyn Jenkins, other attorneys and police. The *EO* also relied on an arrest report from the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office, a court recording and an array of court documents to piece together the events.

## They meet

Steele and his long-term partner, Patricia Allen, lived at her home, 840 N. Sloan St., Stanfield. Allen died Sept. 10, 2016, at the age of 74, after suffering complications from a car crash.

Steele was distraught and unable to care for the home Allen willed to him. He was 72 and had several medical conditions, including diabetes. Then, as now, he relied on a cane or walker to move about and he cannot raise his right arm even shoulder high. His living conditions descended into squalor.

"I had to get somebody to help me with the house," he said.

He contacted Elizabeth Avila. She runs a house cleaning business, and Allen had used her services in the past.

"They were expensive but did excellent work," Steele said.

The Avilas, parents of three children, quickly became entwined in Steele's life. They cleaned his home and did yard work. But they also bathed him and brought him meals.

"They seemed really nice to me at first," Steele said. "They seemed loving and caring."

Neighbors also helped Steele, until the Avilas cut that off.

In the first month, the Avilas said some neighbors called police and said Steele was a "hostage" in his own home. Yet when the police came, Steele would say he was fine. Steele said he even called the police but changed his story when officers arrived.

"I covered it up. I lied," he said.

Stanfield Police Chief Byron Zumwalt said his officers checked on Steele, who told them he did not need help. That left police with too little to go on.

## 'True colors'

Come October 2016, the Avilas had Steele move into their small rental home in Hermiston. The Avilas said they wanted Steele in their lives, and this would make it easier to care for him.

"They started to show their true colors a little bit at that time," Steele said.

They took away his cellphone with the promise of getting him a new



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

**Steve Steele talks with his current caretaker, Jackie McCoy, at her home in Hermiston. McCoy took Steele in after Steele served a three-month stint in the Umatilla County Jail on assault charges.**

one, which Steele said they never did. That December he bought a home at 32602 Baxter Road, Hermiston. Pedro Avila's brother-in-law moved in there.

The Avilas moved Steele there as well, but put him in a small shack attached to the end of the house. Steele said Pedro Avila blocked off the interior access between the house and the shack. The Avilas sometimes brought him food, he said, and he had to use a garden hose to bathe outside at night, so he wouldn't bother the neighbors.

Steele said the Avilas smacked him around a few times and threatened to throw him out or leave him if he didn't give them his money and property. Steele gave Elizabeth Avila all he had.

The Avilas deny ever mistreating Steele. They offered letters he wrote by hand that professed his love for them, how much they meant to him. The only letters that have any dates, however, are letters dealing with money and gifts. On Nov. 16, 2016 — about two months after Patricia Allen died — Steele asserted he was in his right mind and giving Elizabeth Avila everything he owned. On Aug. 28, 2017, Steele gave the Avilas a 2014 Ford Fusion, the Stanfield house, worth \$116,440 at the time, and the Hermiston home, worth \$85,930 according to Umatilla County records. He also gave them everything in the homes.

He received Social Security income of about \$800 a month. He gave access to all the money in any account he had, and sold the annuity Patricia Allen left him for \$115,000 and gave it to the Avilas.

Elizabeth Avila began putting the money into bank accounts solely in her name.

## The other letters

Steele referred to Elizabeth Avila as a daughter, yet he wrote sexually graphic letters to her. Steele said

Pedro Avila directed him to write the letters. He said Pedro told him that kind of writing was a turn-on for his wife. Steele said he feels ashamed of writing the letters.

"I tried everything I could do to try and make them my family," he said.

Pedro Avila denies he had anything to do with them. He said he only found one sexual letter at first, and it was not that bad, so he saw no reason to end the rela-

**"They seemed really nice to me at first. They seemed loving and caring."**

— Steve Steele

tionship with Steele. He said he found a whole cache of them later.

Steele said life grew unbearable, and in the winter of 2017 he drank drain cleaner to try and kill himself. An emergency helicopter flew him to a Portland hospital.

After recovering, he returned to the home on Baxter Road. Steele said Pedro told him Elizabeth was in California and would visit when she returned. Steele saw her that Christmas Eve, moments after a sheriff's deputy arrested him.

"I didn't know what the hell was going on," he said.

The Avilas that day reported Steele assaulted them. They claimed Steele tried to kiss Elizabeth. She refused, and he lost control. They said he struck her on the head and face with his cane. They said he went after Pedro with a knife, then threatened to slice his own throat. The arrest report indicated her injuries were

consistent with an assault.

Steele said he was shocked to see Elizabeth. He also told the deputy he had no idea how she got hurt. In spite of his physical condition, Steele went to jail.

The Umatilla County District Attorney's Office charged Steele with eight counts: three of coercion, two of unlawful use of a weapon, and one each of menacing, second-degree assault and attempted third-degree sexual abuse. The last was the only misdemeanor, the rest were felonies, and the assault charge carries a mandatory minimum prison sentence in Oregon of five years, 10 months.

Steele stayed in the county jail in Pendleton until March 14, when he had a release hearing in the courtroom of Circuit Judge Eva Temple.

## The tables turn

Temple looked over documents from Herman Bylenga, Steele's defense lawyer. She said the large withdrawals from accounts looked suspicious and indicated an elder abuse case. Bylenga added the withdrawals continued while Steele was in the county jail.

Temple questioned why Steele would transfer his home to Elizabeth Avila. Bylenga replied he was under pressure to take that action, and he could show that at trial.

"These are the kinds of facts I would grant for an elder abuse restraining order," she said. "And Domestic Violence Services could help Mr. Steele with that."

Temple ordered Steele released from jail.

Pedro Avila attended the hearing, but his wife was not in the courtroom. Temple said she considered the Avilas the trustees of Steele's property and they had to account for every penny he had.

Bylenga sent a letter on March 19 to the county's chief deputy prosecu-

tor, Jacklyn Jenkins, urging her to dismiss the case with prejudice. District Attorney Dan Primus dropped all the charges on April 2. In court documents, he checked the box for "Insufficient evidence at this time."

Primus and Jenkins later said in looking at the totality of the case, including information from Bylenga, they could not go forward with the prosecution.

The elder abuse hearing took place later, with Circuit Judge Dan Hill presiding. He heard testimony from the Avilas, Steele, his neighbors and his new caretaker, Jackie McCoy. Hill on June 20 issued a 33-page order laying out how he saw the circumstances.

Steele had a legitimate desire for a familial connection with the Avilas, according to the judge, "and sought to exchange all of his property for that security," yet "the inducement for that security was false ..."

The Avilas, Hill continued, were intent on separating Steele "from his assets for their own use and had improper motive for the actions taken" and "wrongfully obtained both the Stanfield and the Baxter Road properties, \$127,336.59 in money, and all of Steele's personal property."

Hill did not buy the Avilas' story about the assault. Pedro Avila testified Steele was 500 pounds and "barely able to move in the preceding months making it hard to believe that his relatively immobility created the threat described by Mrs. Avila."

While her injuries were real, Hill stated, she got them from a car wreck, not an assault.

Elizabeth Avila said she first told hospital staff she was in a crash, then later said Steele had harmed her. She said she regretted the initial lie, but she was scared of Steele.

The judge prohibited the Avilas from having anything

more to do with Steele's finances or property. He ordered the Avilas to convey all the property to Steele and return a minimum of \$127,336.59 to Steele.

Attorney Garrett Sharp of Hood River represents the Avilas in their counter-suit. He filed a motion July 20 disqualifying Hill from hearing the lawsuit. Hill signed that court order July 31. Temple on July 23 recused herself from anything to do with the case.

Records show the courts have not assigned a new judge to the civil matter and no proceedings are on the schedule.

## Justice coming?

Jackie McCoy, who now cares for Steele, ran an adult foster facility out of her home. Department of Human Services inspectors found in March she failed to provide a safe environment, according to state records. McCoy shut down the operation June 29. Steele remains the only adult she provides care for.

Steele said McCoy is caring for him and not taking him for a ride.

She said Steele has never thrown a tantrum, never been cross since she took him in March 14. She said the Avilas were running a long con. Those sexual letters, she said, show just how diabolical they are. Anyone hearing Steele testify that Pedro made him write the letters would think he sounded crazy.

The Oregon Department of Human Services Adult Protective Services investigated 245 cases of elder abuse in community settings in 2015 in Umatilla and Morrow counties. Community settings mean family or friends provide the care, as in Steele's situation, rather than adult foster homes or assisted living facilities. The number of investigations of community settings increased in 2016 in the two counties to 273, and in 2017 they jumped to 334. The agency reported it is not able to provide partial-year data.

Steele said he is a Christian and believes he has an obligation to help others. He said he wants his story to serve as an example of how easy it is to become a victim of theft and elder abuse. He said he does not want anyone to endure what he did.

The Avilas maintained they did nothing wrong and are the real victims. Pedro Avila said the court took everything from them — the home, their belongings, his work tools and thus his livelihood. Pedro said they want justice for all these wrongs.

Justice could be coming, one way or the other. District Attorney Primus said the Avilas are the subjects of a criminal investigation for elder abuse.

You can look up a care provider's compliance history, including inspection violations and incidence of abuse, at <https://itlicensing.oregon.gov/Facilities>

# BUS: Mid-Columbia always hiring to fill turnover behind the wheel

Continued from 1A

and Hermiston — a fund-raising opportunity. Umatilla School District took them up on the offer, and Umatilla students raised money for their clubs and sports for a week by standing on prominent street corners with signs.

"When the kids were out holding signs we had an amazing response," she said. "We got 25 applications."

MidCo is still hiring, however, for route drivers, substitute drivers and drivers to take students on field trips and to away games for sports. Employment requires passing a background check, physical, drug test and commercial driver's license test.

When a driver is hired by MidCo they are given help studying to take a test at the DMV for their learner's permit for their class B



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

**Mid-Columbia Bus Company is running a recruitment booth at the Umatilla County Fair.**

commercial driver's license. Once they receive the permit they get hours of supervised driving until they are ready to take the test to receive their CDL. After they have their CDL and have completed other trainings on topics such as han-

dling rowdy students, they are sent out with an empty bus for a total of five hours' worth of practice drives on their expected route. Trainers can then work with them on any spots they still feel less than confident about before they take on students.

Cook said she has driven buses and the important thing to remember is that your job is to get students there safely and on time, even if that means being "mean" by telling them they have to follow the rules.

The job can be enjoyable, she said, and some people love being able to make money for part of the year while still getting summers, spring break and holidays off. MidCo does have some work opportunities during the summer too, such as driving the Umatilla County Fair shuttle this week. Getting to take overnight trips out of town from time to time can also be a perk.

Despite the turnover rate, some drivers have been taking Hermiston kids to school for 20 years now.

"Once they get past the third year, they tend to stay," Cook said.

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