

Local man wins back property, more from ‘long con’

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Steve Steele prevailed Friday in his legal battle to regain his two homes in Umatilla County from Pedro and Elizabeth Avila.

Steele, 75, also won a judgement of more than \$127,000 against the couple he said took so much more from him.

“My property, respect and credit rating really took a beating through all of this,” Steele said during a phone interview Monday. “And I have some remorse toward the Avilas. I loved them for what I thought they were rather than what they are. I didn’t realize they were running a long con on me from the get-go.”

The Avilas began caring for Steele in September 2016 after the death of his long-term partner. He was grieving and in poor health. They moved in after a few weeks, and during the course of the next 14 months they isolated Steele and kept him in squalor. He soon gave the Avilas everything he owned, including his homes in Stanfield and Hermiston.

Within days of deeding over his last property to them in December 2017, the Avilas concocted a story that Steele, frail as he was, attacked them, beating Elizabeth with a cane and coming after Pedro with a knife. Steele spent 90 days in



Steve Steele, left, speaks with his attorney, Brent Smith, before Friday’s hearing at the Umatilla County Courthouse.

the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton, before Circuit Judge Eva Temple sniffed out the elder abuse situation, leading to Steele’s freedom and the revelation Elizabeth Avila claimed she suffered her injuries in a car crash.

The district attorney’s office subsequently dropped the assault case against Steele and this June charged Elizabeth Avila with first-degree aggravated theft and criminal mistreatment.

The Avilas in court Friday argued and pleaded they never did anything wrong to Steele. They represented themselves and brought one of their daughters. Elizabeth

Avila cried while testifying they had no means to pay Steele. The couple claimed they were ignorant of court orders or whether they should have signed property deeds over to Steele.

But Circuit Judge Rob Collins had none of it.

Collins, polite but resolute, told the Avilas prior hearings covered their arguments. Circuit Judge Dan Hill previously ruled they took the homes and money improperly from Steele. Friday’s proceeding, Collins said, was about one thing — could they prove they returned Steele’s money and homes?

They could not.

Collins concluded the hearing with the order granting Steele his deeds and the money judgement for \$127,336.59 plus interest. The judge’s order did not go over well with Pedro Avila.

“I still have two daughters I can give to him,” he exclaimed.

Collins warned him for being out of line.

Brent Smith, Steele’s attorney, speaking Monday, said Elizabeth Avila is a good liar, and some parts of her story were true, which made sifting bogus claims from reality all the more difficult. But the order is a boon



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Pedro and Elizabeth Avila pose for a picture before Friday hearing at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

for Steele.

“First of all, he has clear title to his property,” Smith said, and the judgement “quieted” the titles, ending any disputes over the properties. And the money judgement means Steele can garnish wages and such from the Avilas, but Smith said it may be a long shot for Steele to get back any money.

“They took more than \$127,000 from Steve, but it was how much we were able to prove,” he said.

Steele’s case relied on a protective order for elder abuse rather than following a route of a lawsuit. Smith said such orders are relatively new to Oregon courts, but the process expedited certain matters.

“We needed them out of

his life right away,” he said, “and we needed them off the property.”

Steele said he moved back into his home in Stanfield earlier this year after a police raid roused drug dealers from the place and a neighbor changed the locks for him. He lives on \$819 a month in Social Security disability and is renting out the Hermiston home for \$600 a month, he said, but the money does not go far after expenses. He also cannot care for the property on his own.

“Basically I’m relying on the kindness of friends to support me,” Steele said.

His aim is to sell the homes, he said, leave behind the chaos of recent years and “live out my life as best I can.”

Friday’s hearing did not wrap up everything. The last attorney to represent the Avilas, Garrett Sharp of Hood River, withdrew in June. However, Smith said the Avila’s paid Sharp with Steele’s money. Smith said he has to work out a way to conclude that.

Elizabeth Avila is not done with Steele. She took to Facebook on Saturday and lamented how the court was unfair. She asserted she is preparing to post evidence on Facebook supporting her claims.

Her next court date in the theft and mistreatment case is Sept. 27.

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