

Former La Center students sue district over past abuse

Now adults, they claim to have been sexually assaulted in 1982-83

Ken Vance
Editor

A man and a woman who claim they were sexually abused by their second-grade teacher during the 1982-83 school year have filed a lawsuit against the La Center School District.

The two, who are not named in the complaint, filed suit against the school district Sept. 20 in Clark County Superior Court. The suit contends that the district was negligent in its supervision of teacher Robert David Ryan at Mary Gabrielson

Elementary School.

The complaint states that because of the district's alleged negligence, the plaintiffs suffered severe and permanent mental, emotional and psychological damage. The suit alleges that Ryan would routinely fondle students under the pretext of having them sit on his lap, or sit next to him, while he gave instruction.

The suit also alleges the district either knew, or should have known about the abuse. The complaint seeks damages, the amount of which to be determined at trial. The former students are represented by Vancouver attorney Michael Beaty and Portland attorney Kelly Clark.

"He had been doing this for quite a long time prior to being caught," said Beaty, referring to Ryan.

In a response to the filing of the lawsuit, La Center Superintendent Mark Mansell reported that Ryan has not taught at the district since 1983. Mansell has been at La Center since 2005.

"In 1983, the Superintendent received a report that a teacher had engaged in inappropriate conduct with a student," Mansell said in the response. "The Superintendent instantly acted on this report and called law enforcement. The principal also personally monitored the accused teacher to ensure the students' safety, while waiting for law enforcement to respond.

"The detectives arrested the teacher within 24 hours of the initial report. In addition to the report to law enforcement, the District also placed the teacher on administrative leave, while the investigation was pending. The Superintendent and Board Members worked with law enforcement and personally met with detectives to ensure the students' safety and the swift prosecution of the former teacher. The District's report to law enforcement and cooperation with detectives led to the former teacher pleading guilty to two counts of indecent liberties in 1983 and serving substantial jail time."

Mansell went on to point out that "the Superintendent imme-

diately reported the allegations about the former teacher to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Olympia. The District formally requested that the former teacher's teaching certificate be revoked. The former teacher's teaching certificate was permanently revoked and he never returned to La Center Schools."

The District provided students with training by law enforcement officers regarding appropriate personal boundaries and maintaining individual safety.

"The District takes its students' safety very seriously and is committed to preventing and responding to abuse," Mansell said. "The District is currently investigating these complaints of about thirty years ago and contacting the appropriate insurance carriers who provided coverage during this period of time."

When asked about the district's response, Beaty elaborated further.

"We certainly would applaud the school district for terminating him and taking away his teaching certificate, the question is why did it take so long?" Beaty said. "That's what we are currently trying to explore. Given that the Elementary School was so small, and according to Mr. Ryan's criminal file, he was quite literally molesting the children in the classroom, it's very difficult to believe that someone at the school district didn't know or should have known."

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Ryan was actually charged with the sexual abuse of 14 of his students in 1983. He pleaded guilty to two counts of indecent liberties and received a suspended sentence of 10 years in prison. Ryan was then sent to Western State Hospital in Lakewood, WA for an evaluation and treatment.

While at the hospital, Ryan told staff that he abused 25 children, according to Beaty. Ryan eventually left the program and served his sentence. His whereabouts are unknown.

"The reason my clients have decided to bring the suit at this point is the abuse happened when they were in the second grade," Beaty said. "The woman, in particular, and the man to a lesser degree, has always had pretty significant mental health problems and has been in and out of counseling."

She has never been able, until recently, to put together the abuse she suffered as a second grader and the problems she's

having today," Beaty said. "It wasn't until recently that she was able to connect those dots."

Beaty said his clients knew of each other and had crossed paths over the years, but they were not friends, or even acquaintances.

"La Center is not a big town," Beaty said. "They ran into each other from time to time."

Beaty said the two don't have the financial means to pay for the treatment and any other services they need.

Beaty said he has since been contacted by other victims in the matter, who he hopes will help provide information on the past abuse. He would not speculate as to whether or not any other victims would bring their own suits against the district.

"We have the burden of proof," Beaty said. "If they (district personnel) knew, or a reasonable person standing in their shoes would have known, then they are liable."