

THE COMMUNITY PAGE

The Last Word (We Hope)

Last March the citizens of Idaho Falls were hammered for six days by the Post Register with a series entitled "Scouts' Honor." Suspicious of the truthfulness and accuracy of the Post Register's version of the story, Frank VanderSloot, president of Melaleuca, decided to learn the truth for himself. He hired the Thomsen Stephens Law Offices to do a private investigation of the case.

VanderSloot has engaged several attorneys for several weeks to review the court documents and talk to those involved with two cases that had been tried and settled in District Court. After a lengthy and thorough investigation, the attorneys, Jason Wood and Brian Boyle, reported back to VanderSloot that the *Post Register* story had failed to accurately report the facts. In fact these attorneys concluded that the *Post Register* appeared to have led its subscribers to a very different conclusion from what Judge Gregory Anderson's carefully and clearly worded decision stated. Judge Anderson's decision essentially vindicated the Scouts from any deliberate or gross negligence. But the *Post Register* did not tell its readers of Judge Anderson's ruling. Instead, the *Post Register* editors chose to quote a different judge, Judge Woodland, totally out of context in an apparent effort to lead the reader to conclude that Judge Woodland had ruled that the Scouts were indeed guilty. Woodland was, of course, not saying that at all. Woodland was only commenting that there was some testimony that supported the Plaintiff's claims. He was not ruling that the testimony was conclusive, compelling or convincing. He was not even ruling that the testimony was believable or had any merit whatsoever. He was only pointing out that the testimony existed.

We find it shameful that the *Post Register* used Woodland's comments totally out of context in order to lead its trusting readership down a path of false conclusions. And we find it inexcusable and very revealing that Peter Zuckerman did not even mention Judge Anderson's ruling in the six-day series.

It is noteworthy that even though the *Post Register* conveniently took one of Judge Woodland's comments out of context, the same paper failed to report what Judge Woodland stated in his ruling about the *Post Register*. The judge was clearly critical of the *Post Register's* irresponsible reporting of the case when he said, "The words [by the *Post Register*] may be defamatory. And rather than seeking to unseal the file through the proceedings set forth in law, the *Post Register* published those very words while their own lawyer was seeking appropriate judicial process. At the very least, such publication and action is irresponsible."

Rather than print Judge Woodland's comments about the *Post Register's* irresponsible reporting of the case, in a bizarre effort to punish its critics, the *Post Register* jeered attorney Gary Dance (see "Cheers and Jeers" March 11, 2005) for bringing the *Post Register's* irresponsible reporting to the attention of the judge. Our community deserves better.

A FABRICATION

One of the most disturbing discoveries reported to Mr. VanderSloot by the research into the case performed by Thomsen Stephens is the *Post Register's* inference that the LDS Church or its leaders were somehow involved in the two civil cases covered in the *Post Register's* stories. The idea that the LDS Church or its leaders were somehow the cause of what happened at Camp Little Lemhi appears to be entirely the concoction of the *Post Register* and its staff. Neither of the two lawsuits contemplated or contained any facts that would indicate that the *Post Register's* conspiracy theory had any basis. Only the *Post Register* took this position. The Plaintiffs didn't. The Scouts didn't. The attorneys for the Plaintiffs didn't. Only the *Post Register* tried to lead the public to believe that somehow the LDS Church was involved. And that was done with the use of headlines, that were obviously intended to inflame the public, and with no facts to sustain those headlines. We feel this behavior by the *Post Register* is dangerously irresponsible.

IT'S IN THE CONTRACT!

On June 12, *Post Register* publisher Roger Plothow stated that the reason he allowed Melaleuca to publish criticisms about the *Post Register* on the *Post Register* pages is, "We are a newspaper committed to a free flow of ideas and information. We trust that the reader can sort out what [is] the best obtainable version of the truth."

We do have a different version of the truth as to why the *Post Register* allows us to print these ads. We believe it is because we have a three-year prepaid contract with the *Post Register* essentially stating that they cannot change a word of our ads unless they are slanderous. Even in spite of that binding agreement, the advertising department for the *Post Register* has called us about two different ads and informed us that Roger Plothow had instructed them not to print our ad. We have spent much valuable time arguing the validity of our contract with the *Post Register* and its attorneys. In the end, our ads got printed. But it appears to us it is because of a legally binding contract, not because of a fair and balanced approach by the *Post Register*.

As Mr. Plothow administers his version of the truth to us, it is important for him to realize that someone might counter it with the facts. A copy of our three-year contract with the *Post Register* is available to the public at www.communitypagenews.com.

After the law firm of Thomsen Stephens had given me their report of the many discrepancies between the court documents and the *Post Register's* series titled "Scouts' Honor," I considered what to do with that information. Certainly the public had the right to know. But as I considered how to inform the public, I was reminded of a college professor in my business public relations class who told his students, "Never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel." I was reminded of his comments again when I read last Sunday's *Post Register* and found almost two full pages in the editorial section dedicated to the art of "Frank-bashing."

My conclusion after reading those two pages was that our criticisms of the *Post Register's* reporting must have hit a "sore spot." My only response to their silliness is: if anyone decided to make a real list of my weaknesses and shortcomings, it would take a lot more than two pages!

When the *Post Register* subscribers first read the *Post Register's* series of attacks on the Boy Scouts titled "Scouts' Honor," many noticed that it did not pass the "sniff test." There were several things that were odd about Peter Zuckerman's and Dean Miller's reporting techniques that indicated there might be something amiss. I found it strange that each story contained the large inscription "Copyright 2005 *Post Register*." I had never seen that before. Clearly the *Post Register* was trying to accomplish something special with this story.

Then there were the headlines. The same ominous headlines were repeated again and again, word-for-word, day-after-day. These headlines told us over and over what we were supposed to conclude from the stories. But the

facts in the story did not support the conclusions presented by the headlines. It was as if the writers wanted us to believe the headlines before reading the story. The tactics were more like what one would expect to find in the *National Enquirer*.



The title "Scouts' Honor" and the ominous shadowy figure of a Boy Scout saluting (far different from the proud Scout featured on this page) revealed that the *Post Register's* real intent was to smear the Scout's good name and take away what the Scouts value most—their Honor. That's when I decided to find out for myself what the truth was, so I hired the firm of Thomsen Stephens to find out the truth. I asked them to be objective and not to form an opinion until they had all the facts. What they discovered was alarming!

They informed me that the *Post Register* essentially painted a misleading picture with misleading headlines and gross inaccuracies consisting of facts taken out of context and leaving out important

information. In the Scouts' Honor story, the *Post Register* did not even mention Judge Anderson's ruling that essentially vindicated the Scouts from any gross negligence. Not only did the *Post Register* neglect to mention Judge Anderson's ruling, it went to great pains to lead its readers to a very different conclusion than what the judge had said.

Based on previous experiences, I knew that if I spoke out on this matter, I would come under immediate attack by the *Post Register* and its designated guest writers. But, then, I don't consider that much of a deterrent.

Frank VanderSloot

IN PRISON WHERE HE BELONGS

Brad Stowell is now behind bars. That's where he belongs. We congratulate all those involved in bringing him to justice. We especially commend the heroes Adam Steed and Ben Steed who had the courage to turn him in.

This case is not over. A new case has recently been filed to determine whether the Scouts acted quickly enough to apprehend

Stowell after it was revealed that he had indeed molested Scouts at camp. We take no position on that case. The facts are still undetermined. Truth is truth. As this new case unfolds, the public deserves to learn the truth. We hope the *Post Register* will tell the story accurately and without bias.

FIGHTING CENSORSHIP

The *Post Register* has long been accused of cherry-picking which "Letters to the Editor" it prints on its opinion page. But until recently the *Post Register's* official position to the public has been that every letter gets printed unless it contains slander or the writer cannot be identified or verified.

Several months ago, Melaleuca challenged the truthfulness of that statement after it had learned of several complaints from writers whose letters, after several weeks and even after months, had not been printed in the paper. Many of these writers had even been contacted by the *Post Register* who had verified the name, address and phone number of the writers. The *Post Register* launched an "investigation" and concluded that during personnel changes some letters had been lost. Shortly thereafter the *Post Register* announced a new policy stating that they will from time to time cut off debate and cease printing certain letters on certain topics. The *Post Register* did not make clear how long that policy had been in place prior to its announcement.

A review of recent letters to the *Post Register* that were submitted but never printed in the paper and letters

that have been printed by the *Post Register's* designated writers as well as the public at large causes us to question the fairness of the *Post Register's* selection of which letters end up being printed. If the *Post Register's* slogan of "Your paper. Your life." is to have any meaning, the *Post Register* needs to be fair in its printing of these letters.

As a safeguard that assures that all non-slanderous letters to the editor get published, Melaleuca is offering to print any letters that the *Post Register* chooses not to print. Assuming we can verify the identity and address of the writer, we will print your "missing" letters on "The Community Page." In the last two years, if you have sent a letter to the editor and it was never printed by the *Post Register*, we would like to hear from you. Please contact Michael Johanson at 528-2011 or e-mail communitypagenews@yahoo.com. No letter is too old to submit to us. It might be interesting to learn what letters have never been printed. To be fair, we will contact the *Post Register* to determine their reason for not printing the letter and inform the public of their reasons.

FINAL WORD

We have entitled this page "The Last Word." We don't mean to suggest that we are under any illusion that we will have the last word on this Scouts' Honor story. We know that the *Post Register* will ultimately have the "last word." That's the way it is in a free nation with a free press. That's the only way it can ever be. And that's the way it should be. Of course, we knew this when we threw our hat in the ring.

Although the press will always have the last say, it does not mean that the press always has an honorable agenda. The community of Idaho Falls deserves the truth from its only newspaper. The public deserves to not be misled by the publisher's or editor's personal or collective agenda.

That is not to say it is wrong for the paper's

management to have an agenda. But their agenda should be clearly laid out on the opinion page, not woven deceptively in stories and articles to mislead the public to arrive at false conclusions.

We are committed to do what we can to assure our community has a newspaper that provides us with "fair and balanced" news. We believe that the *Post Register* can be this newspaper. But it will have to change. We are disappointed that the *Post Register* is taking the Dan Rather approach and is defending a clearly flawed and biased story. There is still time for them to change their position. It would be the honorable thing to do.