

The Community Page

United Against Pedophiles

I have been taught that when you learn you have wronged someone you should take steps to make it right. This Community Page is an attempt to implement that principle.

Two years ago, when the *Post Register* ran a six-day series called "Scouts' Honor", the Community Page took issue with the *Post Register's* handling of that story. We endeavored to point out several areas where the reporting seemed biased or one sided. It appeared to us that the *Post Register* was telling only one side of this story. We feel we had valid and important points, but our argument with the *Post Register* had unintended side effects for the victims of two pedophiles and the families of those victims.

We recently met with Paul, Deborah, Ben and Adam Steed and Jeff and Hannah Bird and learned first hand of their struggle to change Idaho Law to make it more difficult for pedophiles to escape responsibility for their crimes on children. We were impressed by their good intentions and especially by their desire to bring unity and good will back to our community.

They have suffered unbelievably by the long-term damage created by pedophiles who prey on little children, leaving grievous emotional scars of guilt, self doubt, and confusion on young minds and souls. Our hearts go out to them, and we regret knowing that our action may have added to their pain. Our intent was to encourage the *Post Register* to report the story fairly and accurately. We never intended to cause additional pain to the victims. For that we are truly sorry.

Scouting is a great endeavor that has helped hundreds of thousands of young men to develop into fine responsible citizens with high morals and strong values. Scouting has had such a positive influence on our community that many feel a great loyalty to the Scouting organization. Literally thousands have given countless hours of their time and money to build up and support Scouting and its goal to aid in the development of character and honor in young men.

When the *Post Register* resurfaced a story that years ago pedophiles had targeted young Scouts and had used Scout Camp as an opportunity to molest young men, it rocked many in the Scouting community. And when the *Post Register* turned the story into a six-day long front-page series, many who have given their lives to Scouting, felt under personal attack.

Some went into defense mode, defending the Scouts. Others, including the Community Page, criticized the *Post Register* for being unfair in its reporting. Others went into attack mode- attacking the victims who had come forward and reported they had been molested at Scout Camp. Without question, the attacks on the victims were the greatest tragedy. Kids were ostracized at school. Relationships were severed. Family members lost their jobs, endured slurs and threats, and were attacked verbally.

Paul Steed, the father of two victims who had been molested, took up the banner to get the statute of limitations in Idaho changed so that pedophiles cannot escape the law under technicalities of having too much time pass since the crime was committed. He and others were successful in that endeavor. We congratulate them. But that success came at a tremendous price to him and his family both financially and emotionally. The courts are now sorting out the facts as to exactly what happened at Scout Camp ten years ago and how it could have been or should have been prevented.

Clearly pedophiles zero in on areas where they can have access to lots of kids—especially if they feel they can maneuver without detection and without prosecution. Since the Brad Stowell incident, others have come forward to report that they too had been molested at Scout Camp. Their coming forward

was at great risk to themselves, but they felt it necessary to prevent the same thing from happening to other children.

Jeff Bird appears to have a very clear recollection as to what Dennis Empey did to him at Scout Camp several years ago. Clearly, he was severely molested and no one helped him. Actually, "molested" is a much too gentle description. He had been viciously raped by a man that he had trusted and looked up to.

After he got home, Jeff did not tell anyone else what Dennis Empey had done. His parents knew that something serious had happened at camp, but Jeff would not or could not tell them what had happened. They noticed that Jeff was different. He became quiet and reserved. He never returned to Scout Camp and he never felt the same about himself again.

Empey was convicted of forcible sodomy and sexual abuse of another child in Utah in 1991. Empey served a year in prison, two more years on probation and for 10 years was listed on Utah's sexual offender registry.

Jeff Bird decided to go public after all these years because he learned that even after returning from prison, Dennis Empey had been in touch with Scouting and was listed on the Grand Teton Council's website as being a recent contributor of photographs to the Scouting program. Jeff was concerned that Dennis Empey was trying to become involved in Scouting again. Jeff agonized over going public with his experience with Empey but felt he needed to endure the pain of doing that in order to spare other Scouts from suffering the same horrible things. Jeff wrote an affidavit about what had happened to him 22 years earlier. We believe that affidavit to be a truthful statement about what he remembers.

After going public with their story, Jeff and Hannah Bird received several phone calls from other victims of pedophiles congratulating Jeff for his courage in stepping forward. But others saw Jeff Bird's story as just another attack on Scouting and the Birds received several threatening phone calls. The tragedy of these attacks on the Bird family and the Steed family is that the pedophiles win out and the victims are victimized again.

It is time that we all wake up! Pedophiles are a part of every community. Pedophiles hide in a cloak of secrecy and protection from exposure to the light. As a community we need to expose them and prosecute them. We need to congratulate the victims who have the courage to come forward to help prosecute child molesters and send them to prison where they will not have access to our children.

The victims should be protected from further abuse by our community. They should be held up as heroes. We need them to speak out. We can handle the truth, regardless of how grim. If we do not expose the child molesters, our children or our grandchildren or the neighbor's kids could be their next victims. We should all team up together to take a stand to protect our children. Southeastern Idaho should be a very hostile place for pedophiles. We can make it so, but only if we team up and encourage victims to come forward and expose the perpetrators.

We need to stop blaming each other for what pedophiles are doing. Pedophilia is an ugly thing, but exposing it is a good thing. It is the only way to wipe it out. We can and we should do exactly that.

Frank L. VanderSloot, President/CEO, Melaleuca



A Statement from the Grand Teton Council

During recent years there have been disputes about what occurred several years ago involving pedophiles and their activities involving Scouting. Since we were not in key positions in the Grand Teton Council when those events occurred, we have no personal first hand knowledge about the facts surrounding those events.

Much is still in dispute as to what exactly happened and who should be held responsible, and there is substantial conflicting testimony concerning the facts of this ongoing case. We feel legal disputes are more fairly debated and determined in the courts than in the press.

Regardless of this ongoing dispute, it is our hope that this community treat all victims and alleged victims and their families with the utmost respect. No one should be criticized or demeaned because they came forward to report abuse. They should be commended for their courage in coming forward, because it is only then that we can hold perpetrators responsible and accountable for their acts.

We abhor the acts of those who prey upon children and we agonize over the damage caused to their victims. We unitedly send a message to pedophiles: Stay away from the youth of Southeast Idaho and the Scouts associated with the Grand Teton Council! We will continue to expose you and go public with your history and your deeds. We will permanently ban you from Scouting and will report you to the legal authorities. We will help prosecute you and we will testify against you!

We are proud to be part of the Scouting organization and of the Grand Teton Council. We are dedicated to building character and values in our youth. We are committed to the principles of Scouting. And we are committed to working with leaders in our community at all levels to support programs that increase the safety, character, citizenship and personal development of our youth.

David N. Hermansen,
Council President
Grand Teton Council

Clark Farrer,
Scout Executive
Grand Teton Council

A Statement from Jeff and Hannah Bird

Two and half years ago, Jeff came forward with his experience of sexual abuse in an effort to remove a known pedophile, support the Steeds and focus attention on the problem of sexual abuse in the Grand Teton Council. This choice was made at a horrible personal price as we have watched our family suffer as Jeff was personally attacked for taking this stand. We have endured rumors, hate, vicious phone calls, the loss of privacy, and the fear that comes with taking a stand against evil.

We have witnessed arguments about the newspaper, the LDS church, a reporter's sexuality and the values of Scouting. And we watched as Jeff's own sworn statement was maligned with false information.

Today we are hopeful, that we will finally have the opportunity to address the issue that brought Jeff to the public's attention in the first place. We hope that, at last, the attention will shift to the sexual abuse of children and the responsibility of those in positions of trust to be vigilant in watching for and reacting appropriately to allegations of abuse.

We applaud the courage and integrity of those who have been willing to rethink the information they received and the positions they have taken. We hope that their sincere efforts to correct the situation will be respected and well received by the community and particularly victims and their families. There are victims who have not yet asked for help and we hope that they now feel safe in doing so.

Lastly, we hope this serves as a warning to those who would prey on children or those who would permit it. We will not allow you to divide us as a community. We will not allow you to cloak your evil in the good traditions and values of our beloved institutions. If you hurt children, you will not be defended, sheltered, and protected. You will be exposed and held accountable. The outrage of a community betrayed will be focused solely on you.

Jeff and Hannah Bird