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Investigator calls wilderness school reckless in teen's death

A 16-year-old collapsed and died on an August hike in Lake County; a sheriff's deputy says interviews indicate the school may have skirted disaster before

By Erin Golden / *The Bulletin*

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The investigation into the death of a 16-year-old Portland boy who collapsed on a hike with a Redmond-based wilderness school this summer is focusing on reports that the boy may not have had proper nutrition and medical care before and during his hike through a remote area of northern Lake County.

In an affidavit requesting a search warrant to seek documents and other evidence from SageWalk Wilderness School's Southwest Obsidian Avenue office last month, Lake County Sheriff's Deputy Chuck Poré wrote that he believes Sergey Blashchishen's death was a homicide and the result of criminal mistreatment and reckless endangerment by the school.

No charges have been filed against SageWalk or any individuals, and the investigation is expected to continue for another few months.

But Poré said Monday that the information he gathered to make his case for a search warrant — including interviews with school staff members who said Blashchishen started showing signs of distress hours before anyone called 911 — are still pointing him in the direction of a crime.

"I have not changed my course from what I saw when I made the application for the search warrant," Poré said.

Blashchishen died on Aug. 28. About two weeks later, SageWalk Executive Director Mike Bednarz said the Oregon Department of Human Services had ordered the school to send all of its students home.

On Sept. 14, the Lake County Sheriff's Office executed the search warrant, taking more than 400 files and Blashchishen's camping equipment.

On Monday, Bednarz said no students are currently at the school, but declined to comment further, citing the ongoing law enforcement and state Department of Human Services investigations.

Surprise pickup

SageWalk is one of a handful of wilderness schools in Central Oregon for teens dealing with emotional and behavioral issues or other problems, including substance abuse.

According to the affidavit, the boy's mother, Lyudmila Blashchishen, wrote on a school form that her son was aggressive, sometimes rude and uninterested in studying or thinking about his future. On Aug. 26, Blashchishen's parents enrolled him in SageWalk without his knowledge.

On Aug. 27, between 5:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m., two "transporters" contracted by SageWalk woke Blashchishen at his home in Portland to take him to SageWalk, according to the affidavit. Blashchishen's parents, who had been

told to be away when their son was picked up, watched from a neighbor's house.

Poré wrote in the affidavit that surprise early-morning pickups are a frequent occurrence for new SageWalk students.

Blashchishen arrived in Redmond around 9 a.m. and was later transported to a medical facility for blood tests and a drug screening, according to the affidavit. He tested positive for THC, a substance found in marijuana, but a staff member present for the testing said no additional questions were asked about Blashchishen's drug use or his two-year cigarette smoking habit, which his mother had listed on a school medical history form.

Around 1 p.m., Blashchishen was blindfolded and put in a vehicle headed to the school's base camp in Lake County. Around the area of Hampton Station, Blashchishen said he wanted the blindfold removed, and staff members agreed to take the blindfold off and let the boy lie in the back seat if he'd look only at the vehicle's ceiling.

Blashchishen was never told where he was going or what would happen to him, according to the affidavit.

Once he arrived at camp, Blashchishen met other students. The conversation turned to drug use, and Blashchishen talked about purchasing the drug OxyContin.

Calorie count

The students later had a meal of rice and lentils. Though some students were allowed to ask for up to five cups of food, Blashchishen, as a newcomer, was offered just two, according to the affidavit.

DHS regulations for wilderness schools require all students to be offered no less than 3,000 calories of food per day.

Poré wrote that SageWalk staff members could not provide information about what else, if anything, Blashchishen ate before the meal of lentils and rice. He wrote that the boy could have had as few as 400 calories during the day.

That day, Blashchishen wrote a poem, in which he described the camp scene — "squirrels/running around/blue skies/green bushes and trees/but I'm still hungry."

Staff members Poré interviewed later said they did not recall Blashchishen saying he was hungry.

The next morning, at 11:45, Blashchishen, the other students, and three staff members had breakfast and set off for a hike south of Hampton.

Blashchishen carried his camping gear, food, water and clothing in a pack that weighed between 40 and 50 pounds, according to the affidavit. He set out at a "good pace" in the front of the rest of the group, though he didn't know how far he'd be hiking that day. The terrain was dusty, with tall brush and little shade.

About an hour later, one of the staff members noticed Blashchishen walking strangely. The group took a break and Blashchishen drank water and consumed electrolytes.

When the hike continued, another staff member noticed that Blashchishen had started carrying his backpack in a different way, and he was "not resting efficiently," but did not ask the boy if he was having problems, according to the affidavit.

Staff members told Poré that they did not push Blashchishen to continue on, but added that other students encouraged him to continue.

As the hike went on, the staff members said Blashchishen fell several times, but pulled himself up and kept walking. Just after 2 p.m., staff members called the school's field supervisor to report that Blashchishen had

vomited, but the hike continued.

Less than a half-hour later, about one mile from where the hike had begun, Blashchishen collapsed and lay on his back in the sun. The other students moved to the shade and began preparing lunch.

Blashchishen declined the offer of food and shortly after began flailing his arms and yelling in a foreign language, according to the affidavit. Staff members said the boy began to hyperventilate before his breathing slowed and then stopped altogether.

Call for help

One staff member told Poré that by the time Blashchishen stopped breathing, he'd been thinking about calling for help, but had not. At 2:36 p.m., staff members called a school nurse, who then told another staff member to call 911.

In the affidavit, Poré wrote that the call came much too late.

"This was not a call in progress explaining that Sergey was doing weird things and then during the conversation he collapsed," Poré wrote. "This call began with the announcement of the cessation of life and the beginning of CPR. This is a call that should have gone first and directly to 911."

Two staff members trained as emergency medical technicians performed CPR for about 45 minutes before an AirLink helicopter arrived from Bend. But by the time the helicopter arrived, Blashchishen was already dead. Deputies from the Deschutes and Lake County Sheriff's offices were called to the scene.

Poré arrived around 7 p.m., nearly five hours after staff members had begun CPR and more than three hours after they'd stopped lifesaving efforts. He rolled Blashchishen onto his side to examine him, and was surprised to find the boy's body still warm.

"Never before have I encountered a body that was warmer than my own touch, and it was especially remarkable as it was overcast and had been hours since death. ... Although I was gloved I was wearing short sleeves and could feel the heat radiation against my own skin," Poré wrote. "My senses likened the feeling to touching someone who had just gotten out of a hot shower."

The investigation continues

The State Medical Examiner's Office has not yet released the results of an autopsy, and in a preliminary death certificate signed on Aug. 30 by Dr. James Olson, the deputy state medical examiner for Southern Oregon, Blashchishen's cause of death was listed as "pending."

But on the certificate, Olson listed hyperthermia — the condition that occurs when a person's body temperature rises to abnormally high levels — as a possible contributing factor.

In his affidavit, Poré alleges that SageWalk was negligent on several counts. He wrote that school staff members should have asked more questions about Blashchishen's tobacco and drug use before sending him off on a hike. In addition, he said the school failed to consider the stress that could have been created by the previous day's early-morning pickup and blindfolded transport to the campsite.

Finally, Poré wrote that the staff members should have responded more quickly to Blashchishen's signs of distress on the hike.

Gordon Gannicott, a Portland attorney representing Blashchishen's family, said his clients agree with Poré's conclusions.

"I think the family is upset about what happened to Sergey, and they have concerns about these type of programs. ... There's a real possibility for danger with these camps. It appears that the behavioral focus is placed maybe

above the medical focus in the food chain, and you end up with situations where the counselors, the people involved with the camps, are involving straightforward medical symptoms and signs in an attempt to shape behavior, and they should be responding more properly to medical issues."

The state began licensing outdoor schools after the death in 2000 of a 15-year-old student, who was being held facedown on the ground by a counselor while on a hiking trip in Lake County. The student was attending Obsidian Trails, a Bend-based wilderness school that closed several years after the incident. A civil suit filed against the school by the boy's mother was settled for an undisclosed amount.

No criminal charges were filed in connection with the 2000 incident.

DHS spokesman Gene Evans said his department's investigation into Blashchishen's death is ongoing, but declined to comment further.

Poré said he still needs to conduct more interviews and sort through the hundreds of pages of documents seized from the SageWalk office before he can decide if he will recommend that the Lake County District Attorney's office pursue criminal charges.

But in the affidavit, Poré wrote that his interviews with staff members had led him to believe that problems had occurred at the school.

"The pattern suggests that SageWalk, as a day care facility having a seemingly special right to press children to their maximum and beyond, is without the capability to separate symptoms of misbehavior from symptoms of approaching death," Poré wrote. "(My) interviews strongly suggest that, at least for the last nine months, SageWalk may have taken children to the precipice of disaster and been lucky. On Friday, August 28th, 2009, this luck ran out."

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