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Ukiah Pair Keep Molest Case Alive
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By Mike Cenella
Staff Reporter

A purported Ukiah connection to a satanic priest and child molestations at San Francisco's Presidio day-care center stems from a tangled, baffling Mendocino County which was kept alive by a young couple's persistence.

Local authorities for almost four years have insisted their investigations are inconclusive about repeated allegations from Debi and Greg Withrow that his two sons from a former marriage were victims of ritual molestations during ceremonies witnessed by a large group of adults.

The Withrows have contended among those adults were the boys' grandparents and other relatives.

On Monday, the Withrows confirmed in recent months that they and their children had talked to Army Investigators here looking to a possible link between a central figure in the Presidio case and some unsolved molestation cases in Mendocino County.

"They've talked to other children, too," said Debi Withrow.

Withrow said she wasn't sure how much she could disclose about the Army interviews since there is a multijurisdictional investigation underway. She promised to talk more during a press conference this morning called Victims of Systems, a support group Withrow helped found 2 years ago.

Since then the group has sponsored programs on satanic rites and their possible links to child molestation cases. Withrow said the purpose behind today's press conference is to encourage "every citizen to cooperate with authorities investigations of these bizarre crimes against our children."

The latest round of publicity has given new life to the Withrow's cause.

Unhappy about the way their case has been handled in Mendocino County, the Withrows turned to the FBI 18 months ago. Federal agents later confirmed they were looking to the Withrow case for possible civil rights violations, but soon after told the couple the case was outside the agency's jurisdiction.

Then several months ago, Ukiah Police chief Fred Kiplinger, whose department has probed the Withrow case for at least three years, asked Army investigators to take a look because the claims closely resemble the allegations made in the Presidio case.

Last week, criminal investigators with the Army reportedly questioned Lt. Col. Michael Aquino, the satanic priest implicated in the Presidio case, about allegations that he was involved in molestation cases in Mendocino and Sonoma counties. Besides the Withrow angle, Aquino was questioned about sexual abuse at the Jubilation Day Care Center in Fort Bragg. Authorities have been investigating that case since 1985.

Aquino and his wife, Lilith, have been under investigation since August, 1988 when the 3-year-old daughter of an assistant chaplain at the Presidio said they sexually molested her.

No one has been tried in the Presidio case, although charges were filed and dropped twice against Gary Hambright, a former teacher at the day-care center there.

About the Presidio and Withrow's allegations over the past 19 months, Mendocino County District Attorney Susan Massini on Monday said "nothing further has ever been submitted to my office" by an investigative agency.

Massini said she stands by her contention the case has been exhaustively reviewed, and to her knowledge nothing new has developed.

Greg Withrow, an employee of the Mendocino County Assessor's Office, at the time of the FBI inquiry, charged that he and his sons had been "railroaded" by the county's criminal justice system.

It was during the course of a bitter child custody fight involving the two Withrow boys that the charges of sexual molestation surfaced.

Originally the boys said they were sexually abused by a mentally retarded uncle with the knowledge of their grandparents. They later expanded their claims to include their mother, other family members and friends and neighbors. The boys said they were abused during "ritualistic rites."

In late 1986 then-District Attorney Vivian Rackauckas, at the urging of Ukiah police, filed two felony child molesting charges against the uncle and a felony charge of child endangerment against the grandparents.

In early 1987, after Massini was elected district attorney, the grandparents' attorney challenged the charges on legal grounds and they were dropped. The uncle was allowed to enter guilty pleas to misdemeanor child molesting charges. He eventually was ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment and placed in a counseling program.

At the time, Massini said the reduced charges were necessary based upon the conclusion

of her office that the available facts did not warrant prosecution on the felony charges.