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Disabled Scouts Left Without Troop

Group loses charter after leader's discrimination suit

By Kate Santich - Sentinel Staff Writer

Perhaps the Scouts of Titusville's Unit 700 don't quite fit the historic mold. Perhaps, they admit, you couldn't picture some of them strapping on a rucksack and hiking through the wilderness. After all, one has cerebral palsy. Another suffers from the effects of a rare childhood stroke. Several have learning disabilities or asthma.

In Unit 700, though, they seemed to thrive. One of their leaders was a strong-willed woman in a wheelchair. But after the woman filed a lawsuit charging the Boy Scouts' Central Florida Council with violating the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, things began to get very, very unpleasant for Unit 700.

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, where the Scouts were holding their meetings, suddenly kicked them out, citing reports of "divisive" leadership. The group lost its charter with the council, the regional governing body of the Scouts. And most recently, the woman and her husband -- Palma and Keith Rasmussen -- were sent letters ordering them to "immediately sever any relationship you may have with the Boy Scouts of America."

Keith Rasmussen, a 40-year-old former New York City paramedic and an Eagle Scout, had been part of the organization for 32 years. "This has been a witch hunt," said Palma Rasmussen, 48. "I mean, they've made my existence just miserable, which is bad enough. But now the kids are suffering. They should never have taken it out on the kids."

The council sees it differently. It insists the recent turmoil has nothing to do with the Rasmussens' lawsuit, although the organization recently countersued the couple. Council President Jeffery Jonasen said the Rasmussens were not "appropriate leaders," but he would not explain precisely why. "First of all, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church made a decision," Jonasen said. "It appeared they'd had enough. And that's unfortunate, but our reaction to that was to try to get as many options for those kids as we could find in the local community. . . . And those options are still sitting there -- willing and waiting to take those kids in."

The options are openings in other troops, several in Titusville itself, that have agreed to make room for the former Scouts of Unit 700. But the Scouts don't want a new troop. They want their old one back. "The Rasmussens are great," said Chris, a 16-year-old Scout who did not want his full name used for fear of retribution. "I was in another troop before, and I was unhappy because of the way they treated my brother [who has a learning disability]. I felt they were shutting out disabled kids."

A pack, a troop, a crew

The Boy Scouts organization is as complex as any branch of the military and comes with its own lingo. Unit 700, for instance, doesn't just refer to a troop of 10 to 18-year-old boys, but also to a Cub Scout pack for younger boys and a co-ed "venturing crew" for teenagers and young adults. The Rasmussens helped lead all three -- a pack, a troop and a crew -- and at one point had about 75 Scouts, including the Rasmussens' two kids. Before the couple moved to Florida five years ago, they were Scout leaders in New York for eight years.

"To say that scouting was a huge part of our lives is an understatement," Palma Rasmussen said. "We lived the Scouts." Palma was director of a Scout day camp for two years. She helped train leaders. And when, in January 2006, she was chosen to go to the prestigious Order of the Arrow retreat at a Lake County Boy Scout camp, she felt honored. By the time the weekend was over, though, she felt

humiliated. Rasmussen, who suffers from a systemic autoimmune disease, said she was denied use of her power wheelchair and assistance dog, and that her special dietary needs were ignored -- although she had notified the council months in advance that she had medical problems. After the camp, Rasmussen complained. That spring, the Scouts fired her as a district commissioner.

Jonasen counters that the camp didn't need to be accessible: "It has been well-settled in other lawsuits around the country that a Boy Scout camp is not a public facility that must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. . . . But not withstanding that, we do our best to make sure that as many kids can use our facilities as we possibly can." After all, he said, the national organization's policy is to welcome Scouts with all sorts of physical, mental and emotional disabilities.

Accounting sought

In its countersuit, the Central Florida Council also seeks a court-ordered accounting of Unit 700's finances -- saying it "cannot independently verify" whether the Rasmussens have made "improper use of its funds." The suit alleges the Rasmussens cashed \$370 in checks made out to the unit and forced their Scouts to buy clothing and mementos the Rasmussens had embroidered with trademark Boy Scout logos.

"The whole thing is baloney," said Julia Ferrell of the counter claims. Her 14-year-old grandson has been a Scout for eight years, most recently with the 700. "No one was forced to buy anything. The council is just looking for any little picayune thing to try to get rid of the Rasmussens -- who could not be better leaders."

Mary Colvin, a 16-year-old Venturer from Crew 700, agreed: "I see them as the mommy and daddy of everybody. Everybody is like one gigantic, huge family. It's way better than a lot of other troops." Because the group has no official charter -- which it needs -- some Scouts already have jumped to other troops. But about two dozen kids remain, vowing to wait for a group of their parents to get a new charter. It may be a long wait. The parents accuse scouting officials of dragging their heels -- refusing to send the necessary paperwork or to meet with them, as one official had initially promised in an e-mail.

"The toughest thing I've had to do is tell my kids that these people who are in charge have not kept their word," said Steve Barton, who has two boys in the unit. "It's not the kids' interest the council has at heart - it's their own personal interest. I feel like the Boy Scouts picked a bad fight."

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