

Peaceful Rioters deny link to Hockessin-area hate crime

Written by Cris Barrish The News Journal

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A Facebook page often critical of Wilmington and New Castle County officials posted a denial today of any link to a suspected hate crime that included references to County Executive Tom Gordon and his deputy.

“Peaceful Rioters for Wilmington, Delaware, have nothing to do with these despicable allegations,” the anonymous poster wrote.

The posting was made in response to a News Journal article that quoted Col. Elmer Setting, the county police chief, saying that detectives “are investigating the possibility they’re connected.”

Setting spoke out Wednesday after the American Civil Liberties Union of Delaware filed Superior Court papers seeking to quash a state subpoena that commanded Facebook to reveal the “registered owner of other identifying account information” for the Peaceful Rioters page.

The chief said the subpoena stems from the county’s criminal investigation into an unsigned note that disparaged Gordon and top aide David Grimaldi and was placed in the mailbox of a home in the Autumnwood development near Hockessin on Oct. 29.

A week later, Setting said, two Frisbees with Nazi references that again ripped Gordon and Grimaldi were left outside the house.

The missives called Grimaldi a “goon.” One disc had a swastika drawn on top with the words, “Anti-Gordon Gang.”

The woman who lives in the house with her husband and children in the upscale neighborhood has said her family has no connection to Gordon or Grimaldi, neither of whom live in the neighborhood.

Attempts to interview the creator of the page, whom the ACLU said in court papers was an anonymous blogger it identified as “John Doe” have been unsuccessful.

The blogger went online today, though, to deny any connection to the suspected hate crime near Hockessin, and also labeled Setting “Gordon and Grimaldi’s fall guy” and took a shot at Delaware’s attorney general, writing, “Nice try Beau Biden.”

The Peaceful Rioters page, started last February, has criticized both Gordon and Grimaldi, as well as Wilmington Mayor Dennis Williams and other city officials.

Setting, whom former police chief Gordon appointed as chief last year said detectives suspect that learning the identity of the page’s owner could help solve the mystery.

Setting would not say why county investigators think the author of the hateful messages delivered to Autumnwood might be connected to the owner of the Peaceful Rioters page.

“We have no idea who the creator of the Peaceful Rioters is,” Setting said. “But if our investigators

determine that that person is the person who sent the threatening messages and victimized that family, that person will be arrested.”

Setting the victims of the suspected harassment or hate crime aren't his county bosses, but the Autumnwood family.

“She didn't even want her husband to go to work,” Setting said.

Setting emphasized that he's not trying to curtail the free speech rights of the Facebook page, which often chastises officials and has made scurrilous accusations about Grimaldi.

“If the Peaceful Rioters author isn't connected to the crime we're investigating, then that author can do or write whatever they want,” Setting said.

The subpoena, issued Dec. 11 to Facebook officials in Menlo Park, Calif., seeks “the registered owner or other identifying account information” for the Peaceful Rioters page.

ACLU officials said the page's owner, whom the motion identified only as “John Doe,” was notified by Facebook about the subpoena, leading him to ask the civil liberties lawyers to block it.

The ACLU's motion said the subpoena must be quashed unless a Superior Court judge determines it “has reasonably been issued to investigate matters of public peace, safety or justice” and doesn't violate the blogger's constitutional rights to free speech and unreasonable search and seizure.

Kathleen MacRae, the Delaware ACLU's executive director, said the fact that the subpoena stems from the county investigation doesn't change her office's bid to quash it.

“We need a lot more information about the details of the case,” MacRae said.

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