

1/16/06 Modesto Bee A1
2006 WLNR 879638

Modesto Bee, The (CA)
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January 16, 2006

Section: A

PARENTS' CLAIMS DISPUTE SUICIDE RULING COUPLE QUESTION MEDICAL EXAMINER'S CREDIBILITY, QUALITY OF INVESTIGATION

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When investigators found the body of Jill Renee Thiel in her Modesto apartment, they quickly concluded that the young mother had taken her own life.

The 30-year-old hairdresser was lying dead on her living room floor on June 24, an electrical cord wrapped around her neck.

A neighbor said Thiel was hanging from a bed frame when he found her. There was a suicide note in a flower pot outside Thiel's front door, and more notes inside, with instructions about the care of her two children.

Investigators closed the case about six hours later, to the dismay of parents Henry and Carole Thiel of Ceres.

They filed a pair of \$25 million claims -- one against the city of Modesto and the other against Stanislaus County -last month.

They question the quality of the investigation and the credibility of a medical examiner who has been fired by two other counties. They said officials promised to do an autopsy, but it never was performed.

"We have to have answers," Carole Thiel said. "We needed to know. This was my daughter. Jill deserves it."

Such claims are a necessary first step when one wants to sue the government. City and county officials said they will be denied. Once that happens, the Thiels have six months to file a lawsuit. Their attorney, Malcolm Gross of Oakdale, declined to comment.

Sheriff's Lt. Darin Gharat, who oversees the coroner's office, said he has tried to explain the suicide ruling to Carole Thiel, without success.

During one discussion, she argued that her grandchildren could not receive the proceeds of a \$100,000 life insurance policy if their mother's death was ruled a sui-

cide, he said.

She also told officials from the coroner's office that she wanted to rip up her daughter's death certificate and throw it in their faces, he said.

"She is not prepared to accept any findings from our office or from the Police Department," Gharat said.

Carole Thiel said her comments have been taken out of context, and that she is not a money-grubbing hysteric.

She said she is a grieving mother who is raising two grandchildren, ages 2 and 10. She said the children never will go hungry, because her husband is a successful businessman.

She acknowledged that her daughter had a history of alcohol abuse and troubled relationships with the fathers of her children. But she does not believe Jill Thiel was suicidal. She suspects foul play.

"This wasn't an open-and-shut case," Carole Thiel said. "I don't care what they say. It's not."

The Thiels want to take their case to court because they don't think investigators took their daughter's death seriously. They point to reports by the Modesto Police Department to bolster their claim.

One police report refers to Jill Thiel as a black girl in one reference and a white girl in the next. Thiel was white.

Another police report says investigators found suicide notes written by Julie Thiel -- the victim's name was Jill Thiel -- on the kitchen table, counter, bedroom dresser and outside the front door.

That report also states that coroner's deputy Kristi Herr promised to complete an autopsy and contact the police if a medical examiner found anything suspicious.

Herr was never on the scene. Coroner's deputy Katie Soto collected evidence that day.

In a follow-up report, a detective acknowledged that Soto, not Herr, handled the case. He said he assumed an autopsy would be done because Soto asked him whether he wanted to attend.

"We were promised an autopsy," Carole Thiel said.

AUTOPSY NOT REQUIRED

By law, a county coroner must investigate cases of suspected suicide, but the coroner has discretion over the extent of an inquiry and may draw conclusions about the cause of death without performing an autopsy.

The medical examiner, Dr. **George Bolduc** of Stockton-based Delta Pathology Associates, concluded that Jill Thiel died of asphyxia caused by hanging, according to a report he signed Aug. 2.

The Thiels contend that Bolduc misused his authority by failing to perform an autopsy.

They hope to bolster their claims by pointing out that Bolduc has been fired from jobs in Kern and Sonoma counties and left the Orange County coroner's office under a cloud.

The Thiels' private investigator obtained a report by the Sonoma County district attorney's office, internal memos from the Kern County Sheriff's Department and resumes Bolduc submitted to several counties.

Carole Thiel gave copies of these documents to The Bee. According to the reports and memos:

* Bolduc resigned from the Orange County coroner's office under unfavorable conditions in 1987 because he based the cause of death in a murder case on a police report rather than an autopsy. His ruling became a topic of discussion in a death penalty case.

* Bolduc was fired by the Kern County coroner's office in 1996 because he would not wait to begin an autopsy of an 8-month-old child, as investigators requested. In his rush, Bolduc splashed blood on the child's face, contaminating traces of adhesive tape a criminalist wanted to collect. He contested his termination in court, but lost.

* Investigators found discrepancies in the curriculum vitae Bolduc submitted to several counties and noted unexplained gaps in employment, when

Bolduc apparently worked as a census taker, a sales representative at Kinko's Copies, a newspaper deliveryman and other jobs.

Bolduc said the allegations against him were based on misinformation and were not substantiated.

He said he has worked for Delta Pathology Associates -- which handles **forensic** medical exams for Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Tuolumne counties -- since November 2004.

Bolduc said he disclosed his troubles when he was hired. As a result, the documents state, he is not allowed to work on murder cases in Stanislaus County, because officials don't want his qualifications to come under attack in court.

He said there was no need to do an autopsy on Jill Thiel because an external examination supported a ruling of suicide and investigators found nothing to suggest foul play.

"I'm following standard practices," Bolduc said.

NOTES SENT TO LAB FOR ANALYSIS

Officer Rick Applegate, a spokesman for the Modesto Police Department, said investigators reopened the case at the Thiels' request.

He said the department recently sent the notes found in Jill Thiel's apartment to the state Department of Justice for a handwriting analysis, because her parents think she wrote some but not all of the notes.

A state criminalist concluded that one person penned the notes.

"The investigators who were out there have years of experience," Applegate said, "and they do a great job."

The claim against the city names Detectives Al Brocchini and Ray Coyle, as well as three other officers. The claim against the county names Bolduc and Soto.

County Counsel Michael Krausnick said he reviewed the claim and concluded that it has no merit.

"The coroner's office made an appropriate and proper determination based upon the facts of this matter in not requiring an autopsy," he said. "And that will be the county's position."

Mary Akin, a risk manager who handles issues of legal liability for the city of Modesto, said most claims brought against the city are denied after 45 days. People with complaints then can proceed to court.

"If we are clearly at fault, and we have all the evidence, and a determination is made before the 45 days, we generally pay those claims," she said. "But that doesn't happen very often."

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----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

NEWS SUBJECT: (Violent Crime (1VI27); Crime (1CR87); Legal (1LE33); Social Issues (1SO05); Criminal Law (1CR79); Government (1GO80); Government Litigation (1GO18))

Language: EN

OTHER INDEXING: (AUTOPSY; CAROLE THIEL; CAROLE THIEL OF CERES; COUNTY; DELTA PATHOLOGY ASSOCIATES; JILL; JILL RENEE THIEL; JILL THIEL; JULIE THIEL; KERN COUNTY; KERN COUNTY SHERIFFS DEPARTMENT; LAB; MODESTO; MODESTO POLICE DEPARTMENT; NOTES; POLICE DEPARTMENT; STATE; STATE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE; THIEL; THIELS) (Al Brocchini; Applegate; Bee; Bolduc; Darin Gharat; George Bolduc; Gharat; Herr; Malcolm Gross; Mary Akin; Michael Krausnick; Ray Coyle; Rick Applegate; Sheriff; Soto; Susan Herendeen)

KEYWORDS: lawsuit; modbee; suicide

EDITION: ALL

Word Count: 1486

1/16/06 MODESTOBEE A1

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