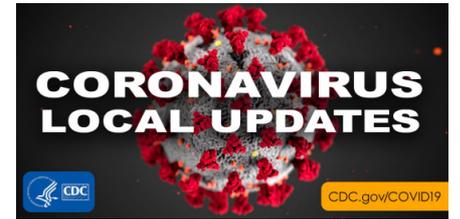


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See PrinceWilliamTimes.com for coronavirus updates



PHOTOS BY ANGELA ROBERTS

The Lukens family of Woodbridge. From left, Juliana, Andrew, Tina, Jax and their nanny, Rebecca Ashley, in the Lukens' Woodbridge home.

After Twitter probe, superintendent says he'll retire July 1

By Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Prince William County schools Superintendent Steven Walts has announced he will retire effective July 1, 2021, when his current contract expires.



Steven Walts

Walts announced his decision Aug. 13, three weeks after the Prince William County School Board heard the results of an outside investigation into allegations that Walts violated the school division's social media policy by exchanging direct messages with individual students via Twitter.

The school board has not released the results of that investigation nor any details regarding its findings. The board also has not indicated Walts violated school division policy. The board met July 22 to discuss the investigation and then on July 29 to conduct Walts' annual review. The board did not discuss or vote on extending Walts' existing contract during those meetings, according to School Board Chairman Babur Lateef.

See WALTERS, page 4

Manassas Park City Council OKs sinkhole fix

By Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The failing culvert at the root of a giant sinkhole that temporarily stranded a Manassas Park community was a problem festering for at least a decade and one city staff were working on right up until the ground gave way before dawn on Aug. 12, city officials said during an emergency meeting of the Manassas Park City Council.

The council voted unanimously later that night to spend up to \$375,000 on a temporary crossing for Moseby Court that is expected to be complete in about three weeks, said Calvin O'Dell, Manassas Park's director of community development.

See SINKHOLE, page 4

Service dog swindle

Woodbridge family hoped for a trained dog for their autistic kids. Instead, they lost thousands

By Angela Roberts
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

When Tina Candella Lukens and Andrew Lukens agreed to trade \$17,000 for a service dog for their autistic 2-year-old daughter, they understood it would take at least 18 months for Bella to be ready to join their family.

But for a year and a half, it felt like she already had.

Candella Lukens printed out photos of the Dutch shepherd puppy and laminated them to show her children. They talked about Bella every night at dinner, and taught their daughter — Juliana — to say the dog's name.

When Candella Lukens revisits those memories now, anger creeps into her voice.

"Moms are inherently protective of their kids — dads, too, but I can only speak for the level



After the Lukens family paid \$17,000 for a trained service dog they never received, they opted for Autumn, a shepherd that is not a trained service dog but is nonetheless beloved by the family.

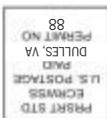
that I will go to for anything for my kids," she said. "So for someone to take advantage of them and hurt them and hurt my family ... You can do whatever you want to me, but not to my daughter."

Juliana never got Bella. And the Lukens family has yet to see a dime of the thousands of dollars they handed over to "Argos K9" — a Minnesota-based nonprofit described as a "veteran-run" operation by its now defunct website.

Now, a thousand miles away from the Lukens' home in Woodbridge, the nonprofit's founders are facing charges of "theft by swindle."

See SERVICE DOG, page 2

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SERVICE DOG, from page 1

In an email, the lawyer for Argos K9 co-founder Jacob Bush — who also served as the company's trainer — declined a request for an interview with his client. The lawyer for co-founder Deborah Fidely-Bush — who served as CEO for Argos K9 — wrote in an email that her client declined to comment. The two defendants are due for a court appearance Aug. 26.

Coming to terms with the alleged deception hasn't just been about the money for Candella Lukens. Even after she and her husband began to get suspicious of the trainers' intentions, their 6-year-old son — who is also autistic — never stopped asking about Bella. And sometimes Candella Lukens wonders if Juliana has ever thought: "Where's my dog?"

On a recent sunny afternoon, Juliana cheerfully traced letters at the Lukens' kitchen table as her mom and dad looked on. Music from a TV show floated up from an iPad in front of her, and her smile revealed that she was missing her two top and bottom teeth.

"I can't believe somebody would do that to a little girl," Lukens said.

'They seemed like nice people'

Candella Lukens first got wind of Argos K9 in 2017, shortly after Juliana — then 2 and a half — was diagnosed with autism.

One of the guys she worked with tipped her off about the business: He and his wife had gotten their dog from a Michigan breeder who worked with the nonprofit, selling pups that were then trained by the Argos founders to serve people who were autistic or suffering from PTSD.

Intrigued, Candella Lukens visited the nonprofit's website, where she was met with photos of Bush and his wife dressed in uniform. According to the site, Bush had served as a K-9 handler in the Marines for a decade. This only solidified her trust in the couple, Candella Lukens said.

"When you're a veteran or you're in law enforcement, you're the one who's running to danger. You're the one who puts everybody above your safety, and you go towards the fire — you go towards the explosion," she said.

So, she filled out the application for a service dog on the website and called the couple. Bush told her all about the dogs he had trained in the past, and promised to train a dog for Juliana in search and rescue tactics, Candella Lukens remembered. The man also said he could train a dog to sit when Juliana tried to run away — stopping her in her tracks with 55 pounds of deadweight — and lean against her, acting like a weighted blanket when she got anxious, Candella Lukens said.

Having a service dog trained in such a way would have been huge for the Lukens family. It would mean taking trips to Costco without fear of losing Juliana. They might even be able to visit Disney World — a trip that would've been the family's first vacation in four years.

After consulting with her husband, Candella Lukens said she and Bush agreed upon a price — which the Lukens family would pay in installments — and set a delivery date: July 2019.



PHOTO BY ANGELA ROBERTS
Autumn, the dog the Lukens family bought after being swindled out of a \$17,000 service dog they never received.

Over the next year and a half, Candella Lukens said she regularly exchanged text messages with Bush, often sending him photos of Juliana.

Then, in July 2018, Bush and his wife drove Bella out to the Lukens' home so she could meet their family. The couple spent all day at their house, and although it took Juliana some time to get used to Bella, by the end of the visit, they were rolling around in the grass with one another.

"They seemed like nice people. They were great with Juliana, with the dog, and very personable," Lukens remembered. "There was nothing when they came that raised a flag."

Rising suspicions

From there, Candella Lukens continued texting with Bush, she said. The next year, as July neared, she reached out to the trainer, asking to set up a day to drive to Minnesota to pick Bella up. According to court records, Bush replied that he was shooting for Labor Day weekend. But in August, according to the records, he said the dog had experienced some setbacks. The delivery would have to be pushed back by a month.

October came and went, though, and according to court records, Bush asked for another extension: this time for Thanksgiving weekend. "I'm sorry for the delay im just not willing to let her go til i am happy with her," he texted Candella Lukens, according to court records. But the next month, he asked to deliver Bella in December instead, according to the records.

At this point, Candella Lukens and her husband were starting to get suspicious. They had paid the last of the \$17,000 the previous July, according to court records, and Bush's text messages were getting more and more infrequent, Candella Lukens said.

Then, after Googling Bush's name, Lukens stumbled across a page on a site called "Military Phonies." The site's author accused Bush of lying about his military service and posted documents to prove it: the results of Freedom of Information Act requests into the personnel records of the Navy and Defense Department.

At the bottom of the page, two commenters accused Bush and his wife of ripping them off.

"I kind of thought, 'Oh man, this isn't looking good,'" Lukens said. "But, you know, you still kind of held out hope because we had met them in person. Right? They had driven all the way with Bella to our house."

Around this time, Candella Lukens also called up the breeder who her co-worker had mentioned, Cheryl Carlson, founder and owner of Cher Car Kennels in Michigan. But Carlson said her business had stopped working with Argos two years prior — around

the same time Candella Lukens had started working with Bush.

"At that point, I knew that this was not good," Candella Lukens said.

The last straw

In early December, Candella Lukens said she gave Bush one last shot: Either he would deliver Bella on Jan. 6, or he would give them a full refund. Initially, Candella Lukens said, Bush agreed on the date. But on the day after Christmas, he texted her again.

"For several reasons among those additional demands you are requesting the delivery of the service dog will not be possible," he wrote, according to court records, referring to the records the Lukens family had requested. "We will begin the process of refunding the funds."

So, Candella Lukens waited until Jan. 6. When the date passed without any trace of the \$17,000, she called the Chisago County Sheriff's Office in Minnesota, she said. Prosecutors filed charges four months later.

Looking back, Candella Lukens is embarrassed that she didn't catch onto the scheme earlier — especially because she and her husband work in law enforcement.

"This is what I do for a living," she said. "And I let it happen to my family."

Obstacles in suppressing the fraud

With a landscape free of regulations, David Favre says there are two main reasons for why fraud is prevalent in the service dog training business: The demand is high and, with the price for a dog often hovering around \$25,000, the pay-off is even higher.

Favre is a law professor at Michigan State University and serves as editor for its Animal Legal and Historical Center website. Over the last five years, he says he's heard about people getting scammed by supposed service dog trainers "on a fairly regular basis."

However, Favre says he doesn't foresee legislators taking up the mantle of urging the creation of a trainer registry anytime soon.

"Most people are going to say, 'It happens once or twice in the state every year or so — That's not something worth creating a million-dollar agency over,'" he said.

Nonetheless, Favre says he's recently observed an uptick in the prosecution of fraudulent trainers. There needs to be more publicity

about these sorts of scams, coupled with stories about what happens when they're identified, he said.

"But the other thing is that those who are caught in this game need to make noise," he said.

And that's just what Candella Lukens intends to do.

Autumn

When prosecutors were drawing up a plea agreement for Bush and his wife, Candella Lukens said she sent in some requests. For one, she asked for a restitution of \$16,900 — the amount the family had paid the couple for Bella. (A friend had paid the other \$100).

And, more importantly, she asked that Bush and his wife receive lifetime bans from participating in or profiting from anything "related to dog breeding and dog training." If they weren't barred from these activities, Candella Lukens worried they'd fall back on their old business.

When it became clear the family wouldn't be bringing Bella home, Candella Lukens reached out to Carlson's kennel once again. Their house needed a dog, and, by chance, Carlson had one in mind for the family — a sweet puppy who was good with kids.

On the weekend Candella Lukens drove out to Michigan to bring Autumn home, a storm was blowing through the state. But even as the weather shifted from snow to sleet to rain to fog, Candella Lukens drove on.

"I hit every weather condition there was," she said, laughing at the memory, "but I was like, if I don't come home with a dog, Jax won't let me into the house."

Autumn isn't a service dog, but Candella Lukens said she is perfect. While it took Juliana a bit to warm up to the newest member of her family, they get along just fine now. That morning, Juliana had woken up to Autumn poking her nose into her bed, Candella Lukens said.

Maybe one day, the family will try again to find a service dog for Juliana, Candella Lukens and her husband said. They'll be more cautious this time around, and do their due diligence in making sure the trainer is legitimate.

But for now, their home feels full.

Angela Roberts is a summer intern from the University of Maryland's journalism school. Her internship was made possible by the Piedmont Journalism Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

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