

Fauquier Times

February 26, 2020

Our 203rd year | Vol. 203, No. 9 | www.Fauquier.com | \$1.50



Court proceedings in Levi Norwood case remain closed to the public

By Robin Earl
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Reporters filled the second row of a courtroom in Fauquier County Circuit Court Monday afternoon as 17-year-old Levi Norwood entered the courtroom in a sweatshirt, khakis and handcuffs. Spectators recognized the defendant by his well-publicized purple hair, a description of which was widely circulated while police searched for him last weekend before he was apprehended in North Carolina.



LEVI NORWOOD

Norwood has been charged with two counts of murder; he is accused of the shooting deaths of his mother Jennifer and his 6-year-old brother Wyatt on Feb. 14 at their Mid-

land home. Police say that Joshua Norwood, Levi Norwood's father, has said his son also shot at him. Joshua Norwood said he escaped, injured, from the house after finding his wife and son dead.

Sgt. James Hartman of the Fauquier County Sheriff's Office said that the hearing was moved from the Family and Domestic Relations Court on Main Street to the Circuit Court building on Culpeper Street because it is easier to provide security there.

Family and Domestic Relations Court Judge Melissa N. Cupp, announced before Levi Norwood entered the courtroom that a newspaper had filed a "motion to intervene," to have the hearing open to the public. She explained that the *Washington Post*, through its attorney, claimed that having the proceedings open to the media would allow for a catharsis for the community in a murder that has caused great pain in the southern Fauquier community.

Wyatt attended Mary Walter Elementary School in Morrisville and Levi Norwood was a student at Lib-

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TIMES STAFF PHOTOS/COY FERRELL

Supporters of Achan Onla Inthichak celebrate outside Fauquier General District Court after the commonwealth's attorney declined to prosecute the monk's criminal charge of identity theft in the attempt to defraud.

Dispute at Catlett Buddhist temple has worldwide reach

By Coy Ferrell
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A dispute over who controls the board of directors of Wat Lao Buddhavong, a Theravada Buddhist temple in Catlett, has caused deep rifts far beyond its walls, reaching deeply into the Washington, D.C. area's Lao-American community.

The most visible expression of Theravada Buddhism in the United States for more than three decades, Wat Lao Buddhavong has become a center point for a conflict that is, simultaneously, legal and cultural, Lao and American, personal and ideological. The conflict does not promise to resolve easily.

Declaring themselves to be the legitimate voting body with the authority to elect new board members, 77 people gathered at the temple in August 2019 to elect a new board. Despite that vote, the original board retains legal control.

Following quickly on the heels of that vote came a lawsuit, competing no-trespass orders, multiple crimi-



The Wat, the main temple building, stands next to a pond at the Wat Lao Buddhavong complex.

nal charges and, most visibly, a barrage of angry sentiment and rumors shared widely on social media.

Most online posts accuse the current four-member board of directors of some variation of corruption or fraud. Some images circulating online have been manipulated to depict violent acts perpetrated on one of the senior monks at the temple, though this is not representative of the bulk of the posts being shared. The temple recently hired a private security firm to screen visitors out of concern for the monks' safety.

No court has ruled on allegations of

misconduct by any of the people who have administered the temple since 2006, and the sole legal challenge to the current board, a lawsuit alleging a wide range of misconduct, was dropped this month. The current board members adamantly deny any wrongdoing or mismanagement, and say they are committed to publishing regular, thorough financial reports and transitioning to new temple leadership in response to the community's concerns.

Criminal charges have been filed against three people – including a monk – allegedly involved in actions

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Dispute at Catlett Buddhist temple has worldwide reach

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to replace the board of directors. This week, the temple filed a civil suit against six people who, the suit claims, have caused collectively \$1.25 million in damages to the temple's reputation.

The fight over control includes longtime community members, especially those who took part in the initial fundraising to build the temple in the early 1980s, and who feel that they should have a formal role in running the temple.

Also involved are a younger generation of Lao-Americans, now middle-aged but generally more educated and more assimilated to American culture than the first major wave of Lao immigrants following the Vietnam War. They feel that the time has come for temple governance to represent them and their worldview.

The temple's current leadership has said they want to transition to a board that reflects the push for a more participatory governance model. Neither the temple leadership's supporters nor its detractors show signs they are prepared to abandon their positions. The global reach of the conflict, thanks to social media, means that reconciliation is all the more difficult.

The current board of directors

Three elder monks, whose legal names are Bounmy Kittiphanh, Phonexay Mingsisouphanh and Southalovong Boutah, have composed the board of directors since 2003.

In 2006, Ilene Tognini was added to the board. In the current uproar against the temple's leadership, a great deal of the anger is addressed at her specifically; an online petition to remove her from the board had over 1,100 signatures as of Feb. 12. (Another active online petition against Mingsisouphanh had almost 800 signatures)

Tognini is an attorney and until recently a longtime resident of Fauquier County; she now splits her time between Florida and Northern Virginia. Not raised as a Buddhist, she came to the temple in 2000 "as a neighbor," she says. "The monks welcomed me in, and I kept coming back." She has since embraced Theravada Buddhism personally. She said that Kittiphanh and



Thinnat Nachampassak, Ilene Tognini, Phantarattana Phrasavath and Achan Noumay Viriyaphanyo pose inside the *Wat*, the main temple space, at Wat Lao Buddhavong.

Mingsisouphanh are the godfathers of her children, and she has photographs of the monks at her home celebrating her children's birthdays and other ceremonies with them. When she enters the temple, she performs the ritual of bowing before the monks before speaking to anyone else. "I am a servant," she said of her role at the temple.

Explaining her addition to the board of directors, Tognini said that "the two older monks go on annual pilgrimages to India, and if something came up you need two people [to establish a quorum], so they asked me to be on the board. It was simply done to facilitate their wishes." Since then she has provided advice and administrative assistance to the board of directors, but always defers to the senior monks and acts only with their knowledge, she said.

The opposition

A new organization, Lao Global Heritage Alliance, was created in October 2019 as an alternative to the organizational structure of Wat Lao Buddhavong. As of Jan. 31, LGHA said they had almost 100 dues-paying, voting members and almost 200 non-voting

members. Its leadership is composed largely of those who were part of the effort to replace Wat Lao Buddhavong's board of directors in August 2019.

An LGHA representative claimed that the organization represents the "majority [of] members of the Laotian community in the Northern Virginia and a good portion of Maryland." The organization is raising funds to hire an attorney and "to expose all facts regarding the past and present activities of the WLB Board of Directors." More than 100 people attended a Jan. 25 "town hall" hosted by LGHA. The crowd cheered on speakers denouncing the current Wat Lao Buddhavong leadership, especially Tognini.

In an effort to dispel concerns about the temple's governance and finances, the temple has compiled years of financial statements -- including an independent review by accounting firm PBMares of temple finances since 2015 -- and administrative documents and legal filings and posted them to a public website. Tognini said that going forward, the corporation will file IRS Form 990 annually, an action that is not legally required for religious organizations.

The temple's directors also said that they are committed to transitioning to new leadership, but that transition must be done in a legal, open way that is true to Lao tradition and that protects the temple's assets. "The board is -- we're so dedicated to creating a transition board," said Tognini. "We want to choose leaders who are going to be true to the customs and values [of Theravada Buddhism]." But, she emphasized, "it will be done legally, in compliance [with the law] and true to the traditions of Buddhism. It will not happen by extortion and threats."

All parties who spoke to the Fauquier Times said that a peaceful resolution is their ultimate goal. At this point, though, many people with ties



Achan Onla Inthichak, a monk who had been residing at Wat Lao Buddhavong until September 2019, appears with a group of supporters outside Fauquier County District Court, after his case ended with nolle prosequi.

to the community now have little trust in the temple's leadership.

"In my own opinion, the temple can reach out to us, talk to us and have a dialogue," said Souksomboun Sayasithsena, one of the original trustees for the real estate purchased in 1988 on behalf of Wat Lao Buddhavong, in a Feb. 4 interview. In 2010 he received a no-trespass order from the temple for allegedly starting a petition denouncing the two senior monks, a charge which he denied. He said he did not return to the temple until the Aug. 26, 2019, emergency meeting called in Kittiphanh's name.

Tognini said that the board is more than willing to have a constructive conversation with members who want change. She added that temple leadership has tried to reach out to opposition leaders, with little success. Even the people who received no-trespass orders, she said, are "welcome back into the temple once this issue resolves," emphasizing that despite the conflict the temple remains open to the community and continues to operate normally.

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A woman listens to a speech during a "town hall" by the Lao Global Heritage Alliance, an organization created in late 2019 as a response to the conflict at Wat Lao Buddhavong.