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Bully plays the victim

Zip-tie incident
at school reveals
nature of activist



Opinion column by
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Arizona Daily Star

School officials were trying to “take the law into their own hands.”

That’s what Kelly Walker said as he walked up to Mesquite Elementary School on Sept. 2, with zip ties and a plan to arrest the

principal if necessary.

It was justified, he argued, because they were “bullying” children and families by imposing pandemic quarantines he considered illegal.

“I would like anybody who can who’s close by to go to Mesquite Elementary School and back up these parents,” he said via live video online. “What’s happening is wrong, and we’re not going to have this in our community.”

The incident summed up Walker’s year as an activist against pandemic public-health measures in the Tucson area that he considers oppressive and illegal.

He accused others of taking

the law into their own hands as he was taking the law into his own hands. He accused others of bullying while he tried to rouse an intimidating mob. And he claimed to represent “the community” when it is just a small segment of fellow travelers.

Later, he and the two other men who joined him in confronting the principal were cited for misdemeanor trespassing. Walker took video as he lectured the officer sent to his house.

“You’ve lost consent of the governed, because you’re following corrupt orders,” he said in a video of the police encounter.

“I put my job on the line to help these people,” Walker went

on. “And you’re going to give me a criminal trespass order because I stayed there to help handle the situation.”

Facebook harassment

A sense of persecution and grandiosity has characterized Walker’s public statements since he came to broader attention on Sept. 15, 2020.

That’s the day Walker appeared at a Pima County Board of Supervisors meeting and read vulgarly-laced messages that he said were directed at his business, Viva Coffee House in Rita Ranch, as a result of its resistance to the

county’s mask requirement.

When he initially refused to stop reading them, then-chair of the supervisors Ramon Valadez asked deputies to remove him.

“My baristas are afraid. My family is afraid to sleep at night,” Walker told the supervisors before he was pulled away.

While Walker identified his business and family as victims, people who crossed Viva Coffee, criticizing Walker or the business on Facebook, quickly became victimized themselves. They were subject to campaigns of harassment that began more than a year ago and continued up to last week.

Steller

From B1

In a lawsuit filed Jan. 22, local real estate agent Aaron Parkey accuses Walker and others of harassing him and harming his business by "memorializing" and deleting his Facebook account.

Memorializing is how people deal with the accounts of Facebook users who have died. It is shockingly easy to abuse. All you have to do to memorialize another person's account is provide their account name, the date they died, documentation that they died, and an email address.

You can document that someone has died, even if they haven't, by posting an obituary on a free site. Harassers can then use the fake obit they wrote to tell Facebook their target died.

"I was memorialized probably 50 times, and every new account I tried to open got memorialized," Parkey said.

Eventually his Facebook account was deleted altogether. That was a problem, Parkey says in his lawsuit, because his personal Facebook page controlled the page for his real estate business.

Among the people he is suing, along with Walker, are Justine Wadsack, a former candidate for state Legislature, and her husband Garrett. The Wadsacks filed a rambling counterclaim, arguing that in fact it was Parkey who harassed and stalked Walker, the Wadsacks and others.

Walker denied responsibility for the Facebook harassment in a Tucson Weekly article published in October, and he filed a brief counterclaim against Parkey, too.

Walker, who moved to the Tucson area from Oregon in July 2017, declined to be interviewed for this column. He is not formally the owner of the coffee shop, which is owned by his wife, Andrea, and her parents. But it has built a strong following among some conservatives as a result of Walker's activism.

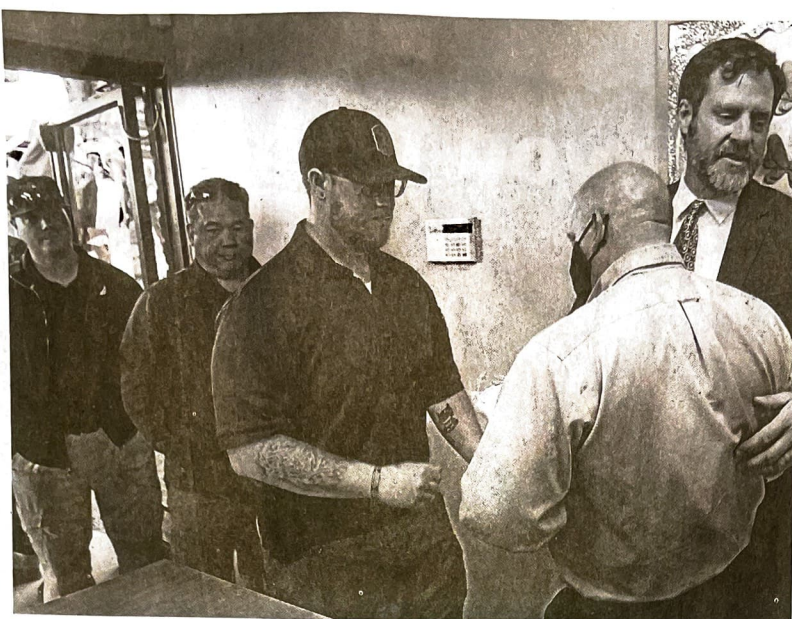
Walker emailed a statement in response to my inquiry about what I termed his political activism.

"I am not interested in 'political activism.' I am a father and business owner interested in helping people who are suffering, in need or being persecuted — no matter their politics, religion or outward appearance. Beyond that, as Voltaire said, I wish to 'cultivate my own garden.'"

Fake accounts

The same sort of harassment that Parkey reported has happened to many local people who have criticized Walker or Viva Coffee House online since the debate over mask mandates ramped up in July 2020. I've interviewed seven victims: Gregory Anderson, Sherry Brovas, Jenn Hopkins, Kymberley Moffett, Mark Sawyer, Gretchen Wirges and Parkey.

They all had Facebook accounts memorialized or deleted after criticizing Viva Coffee. It's been a hard loss of connection



KELLY PRESNELL, ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Kelly Walker, at right in tie, barges into the Vail Education Center after officials tried to keep him and others from entering without wearing a mask at the Vail School District Governing Board meeting on April 27.

for some of them, especially occurring during the pandemic year of diminished social contact.

"I'm missing out on a lot," said Brovas, who is retired and used to spend some hours a day on Facebook. "I'm missing out on the acquaintanceship."

But that isn't nearly the extent of the trouble. Fake Facebook accounts bearing vaguely vulgar names like Shay Kuhmstern or Bren Dover have sent threatening messages or posted their targets' images to a collection of memorialized accounts, placing the victims' faces on tombstones or in a spider web.

Mark Owen Sawyer, a retired high school teacher, first tangled last year with what he later learned were fake accounts in the reader comments on the Arizona Daily Star Facebook page. He ended up with his account memorialized many times, then deleted. But it didn't end there.

"They made fake accounts in my name. They would put up horribly racist and sexist and misogynous stuff," he said. "Online, they would say, 'Mark Owen Sawyer is a pedophile, a communist, a satanist, a baby killer; you name it.'"

Just last week, when Viva Coffee made a Facebook post about its maple scones, a comment appeared underneath the post from a "Mark Sawyer" account that said: "How much are a dozen of those. I have little boys in my neighborhood that would like them."

Moffett, an attorney who has been a harassment victim, said there's no firm proof that it is Walker or his associates harassing them online. But the common denominator between all the cases they know was criticizing Viva Coffee or Walker online. In her case, she criticized him last year for comparing mask mandates and pandemic measures to the Holocaust.

Just Tuesday, unaware of this pattern, Gregory Anderson sent a Facebook message to Viva Coffee House objecting to Walker's participation in the

zip-tie incident, he told me. He got a message back quickly from the Viva Coffee account.

"Then I got a private message from a fake Facebook account. It was 'Bren Dover,'" he said. "It said, 'You look like a pedo! I didn't respond to that. Seconds later, my Facebook page was deleted.'"

"My interaction with him was like a few words, then boom, my account was gone."

Masculinity is a favorite issue

Walker is a prolific writer and talker, posting many videos of himself online, and one of his top topics is masculinity. In fact, he has written an occasional blog titled "Tonic masculinity," in which he celebrates what he considers the truly masculine male. Not "toxic," not "beta," but "tonic."

Among the masculine male's characteristics, Walker wrote, "A good man is hard to offend." That's the title of a post he wrote on Sept. 29 last year, not long after the Board of Supervisors incident.

"There is no inherent tie between the color of one's skin and the content of their character. However, the 'thickness' of one's skin does indicate the depth of one's character. A 'thick skinned' man is as impervious to insults and slander as a rhino is to a shot from a BB gun."

Whoever is harassing critics of Walker and Viva Coffee, of course, does not have thick skin. Quite the opposite.

But Walker sounds confident of his own masculinity and appreciative of that he sees in others. In a video he made after the zip-tie incident, Walker wore a shirt that said "End the War on Masculinity."

"I know from experience that when a father walks into school with an issue, it's different than when a 5' 8" 5' 6" woman walks in," Walker said. "What it is is this masculinity. We're bold, we're up front. We're protectors."

In another video taken at the

coffee shop in May, Walker wore a T-shirt featuring the outline of the state of Arizona with these words printed inside the outline: "Ducey Doesn't Lift." Meaning weights, I assume — Gov. Doug Ducey doesn't lift weights.

Storming the school board

From the time he was battling Pima County over mask mandates in September 2020, to July this year, Walker fine-tuned his political manifesto.

A version handed to a Pima County health inspector in September at the coffee shop was called "Declaration of the People's Primacy," but when Walker posted a new version of the document in July, he called it "Declaration of the People's Natural Rights."

He starts by asserting "The 2020 election was demonstrably fraudulent; treasonous usurpers are now in office from the White House on down."

From that faulty assumption, it goes on to say, "We are not declaring a rebellion, but rather that elected and appointed individuals are in treasonous sedition against the People's Constitution — thereby nullifying the Social Contract with which We the People agreed to allow them to represent, not rule, us."

Boiling that down, he's arguing that the people in office now, from the White House to the school board, have no authority.

So no wonder he was one of the first people past the security checkpoint when a couple hundred anti-mask protesters showed up at the Vail School District board meeting on April 27, though none of his five children attend Vail schools.

The school board canceled the meeting when the crowd pushed past security. Afterward, the protesters assembled and chose from their own ranks a putative new school board.

"Meet the NEW Vail School District Board, elected by the PEOPLE!" one post by the Viva Coffee House said later. "What

an amazing choice — these people CARE about YOU, not power, not politics...YOU! We don't know if this will ultimately be legitimized, but we understand the sentiment."

He and the protesters were in the vanguard of loosely coordinated disruptions of school board meetings around the country, some over pandemic measures, others over critical race theory.

'No violence was done'

A week before Rishi Rambaran complained about his son being ordered into quarantine at Mesquite Elementary, Walker wrote an alarming blog post.

"America is on a sure and certain path to democide," he wrote. "Specific patterns exhibited in governmental and social responses to this 'pandemic' strongly indicate that our society is on track to repeat the horrors of history."

Which horrors? "The Holocaust in Germany, the Warsaw Ghetto genocide, the murder of millions of Russians and Chinese under Communist regimes, the Killing Fields of Cambodia."

These are, of course, preposterous comparisons. There are no real parallels between efforts to coerce people into getting vaccinated or wearing masks against a dangerous virus, and the slaughter of millions in genocides.

When Rambaran reported Sept. 2 that his son had been quarantined even though he wasn't sick, Walker treated it as an urgent threat.

Frank Tainatongo joined Rambaran and Walker, and they gathered up the zip ties and headed to the school.

"If you insist on this, we'll call and have you arrested," Walker said as they walked up to Mesquite Elementary and he narrated live via Instagram. "And we're willing to make a citizens' arrest if necessary. The community has been very clear — we're not putting up with this."

The conversation between Principal Diane Vargo, Walker and Rambaran was civil enough, but of course the implied threat of the zip ties worked. Vargo was intimidated, as she acknowledged in later interviews.

"Again, no violence was done yesterday," Walker said in a video afterward. "Somebody came in and put down zip ties."

But he's not fooling anyone. In his short time on the public stage in Tucson, Walker has proclaimed himself above the law and acted to intimidate. A man's strongly held beliefs don't give him a license to bully in alleged defense of people who are being bullied.

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