

Local News

Father plans to sue over daughter's death at psychiatric facility



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Steve and Ann Marie Bunch, Ashlie Bunch's father and stepmother, with a photograph of Ashlie when she was 13 years old.

Committed to a psychiatric facility, Ashlie Bunch took her own life in January 2008. Today, her father plans to file suit against the facility, the McGraw Residential Center in Seattle, for wrongful death.

By [Maureen O'Hagan](#)

In her diary, Ashlie Bunch wrote that she wanted to be an Air Force pilot. A rapper. A mom.

She wanted to drive a yellow Mustang with black stripes. To live in the woods — in a city, by the ocean.

That one made her dad, Steve Bunch, laugh, as he remembered Ashlie in their Sultan home. She was 15 and smart and funny.

She was also very troubled. Committed to a psychiatric facility, Ashlie took her own life in the middle of the night in January 2008.

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Today, Bunch plans to file suit against the facility, the McGraw Residential Center in Seattle, for wrongful death. The lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages, claims staffers failed to regularly check on Ashlie in her room, as required. The state Department of Health last year reached the same conclusion.

“If somebody had gone in there, there is a likelihood she would be alive today,” said Bunch’s attorney, Lawrence Kahn. Said Gena Palm, executive director of Seattle

Children's Home, the nonprofit that runs McGraw, "We're not in a position to make a comment on matters relative to a lawsuit at this time."

To Bunch, Ashlie's death points up flaws in the program at McGraw, but the family's trials over the years also should be very familiar to the thousands of parents in Washington who have seriously troubled children.

"Once you start experiencing it and living it, it's unbelievable," he said.

Bunch and his then-wife were living in Connecticut when they took in Ashlie and her little sister as foster children. They adopted the girls a year or so later. Bunch and his wife later divorced (he has since remarried) and Ashlie's sister stayed with her mom, while Ashlie and her father moved to Washington state.

When Ashlie was about 10, she told Bunch she could hear voices ordering her to kill her mother.

At a fast clip, Bunch said, Ashlie went from "having fights in school to disrespecting her teachers. She was suspended and expelled. She started cutting herself and running away."

She went through a roster of therapists and spent time in several hospitals. And things weren't improving.

Once, she wrote a note demanding school officials "stop the WASL" because she had planted a bomb.

Yet Ashlie didn't remember writing the note, Bunch said.

"If I don't remember that, I don't know what else I'm capable of," she told her dad.

Another time, she wrote a note threatening to "kill her teachers and gouge the eyes of the kids on the bus that pick on her," Bunch recalled.

The day she brought a knife to Sultan Middle School in 2007, it was clear drastic steps were needed. A judge ordered her hospitalized, and she wound up at McGraw, one of four residential facilities in Washington where children are sent for long-term psychiatric treatment. With only 91 beds statewide, only the most serious patients are admitted.

At the time, Bunch thought it was "our saving grace."

After six months, Ashlie hadn't stabilized. Eight times, according to the lawsuit, she tied something around her neck "in apparent efforts to strangle herself or gain attention from staff."

Two weeks before her death, she was treated at the hospital for puncture wounds and cuts she got from stabbing herself with a broken radio antenna.

On the night of Jan. 28, she was on "five-minute checks." That meant staffers were supposed to check on her — and seven other kids — every five minutes, round-the-clock.

In practice, though, checks weren't typically done overnight, staffers later told Department of Social and Health Services investigators. Instead, it was widely known that staffers would fill out the logbook at the beginning of the shift and look in on kids only if they heard someone awake.

It was impractical to do the checks, staffers said. The bedroom doors, often closed, didn't have windows. Unlocking doors every five minutes would wake kids up.

The night Ashlie died, no one made the rounds, state investigators determined. She was found dead in her room at 7:50 a.m., a shoelace around her neck. She had been dead for hours.

"That was hard for me to take," Bunch said.

The three staffers who failed to make the checks were registered counselors — typically paid \$12 an hour — and the Department of Health suspended their credentials for at least five years. McGraw was also put under a corrective-action plan, with which it complied.

"It seems that these institutions don't do proper training, that they take these things very lightly, and this is the result: We have a dead child," Kahn said.

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