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Trial scheduled in Lakeside assault case

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By RICHARD HANNERS
for the Bigfork Eagle

A Lakeside woman who claims to communicate with long-dead religious masters will face a jury trial Sept. 18 in Flathead County Justice Court on misdemeanor charges she assaulted a Whitefish doctor.

A temporary restraining order against Devra Patton West, a self-styled guru who calls herself Surya Ma, was issued by Judge David Ortley last October after Dr. Patricia Cole, of Whitefish, requested protection. Cole claims West assaulted her in April 2006 and again in October 2006.

Speaking for West, Geoff Reynolds claims the charges are untrue. He said photos of the first alleged assault were taken on a different date, and the bloody clothing in the photos resulted from Cole falling down a stairs at her Cherry Creek condo in Lakeside, not from an assault.

Reynolds, who is a financial adviser for West, said he has worked as an accountant in Los Angeles, where he dealt with well-known personalities. He is helping West raise several hundred million dollars to purchase and develop three properties around Flathead Lake for VIP spiritual-healing spas.

The man who took the photos, however, tells a different story about the alleged assault. He came from out-of-state and was sharing the condo with Cole while he attended sessions with West. He said he was meditating when Cole appeared wearing a bloody sweatshirt.

The man said they cleaned some of the blood off Cole's scalp and then took photos so Cole, as a doctor, could see her injuries and decide how to treat the wound. Cole said West hit her on the head with a shoe, the roommate said.

Cole said she first came to Montana from Minnesota to attend spiritual sessions at NakaShela, West's facility in Victor, from 2002 through 2004. She moved to Montana to live in 2005 with the idea of combining West's spiritual teachings with medical knowledge.

Cole eventually assumed management positions with several of West's for-profit and not-for-profit operations. As business fell in Victor and the NakaShela property was foreclosed, West moved her business north to Lakeside.

Reynolds claims Cole owes West \$753,484 and that colors Cole's allegations. Cole's bills for 2004-2006 totaled \$1.3 million, including \$250,000 for an "internship" under West and \$213,750 in "therapy fees" for eleven months last year.

Cole managed to pay West \$621,484, but it didn't come easy. At one point, Cole cashed out her IRA and paid West \$293,843.

Out of six businesses mentioned in West's literature, only one remains active and in good standing with the Montana Secretary of State office -- Sacred Environments LLC. Two were never registered -- Divine Unity Foundation and Millenium Mind Institution; two were involuntarily dissolved -- Surya Enterprises Unlimited and Global Guardianship Initiative; and one was involuntarily revoked -- Sacred Archive Institute.

Besides being evicted from her Bayside home in Lakeside and bouncing a check for the purchase of the well-known Osprey House on Angel Point, West has a \$2,287 lien against her for failing to pay unemployment taxes for her Montana employees.

Reynolds claims that several people have been stirring up trouble by publishing untrue allegations against West.

He points out that former office manager Rebecca West, who is no relation to Devra West, was denied benefits by the Montana Department of Labor and Industry because she was unable to prove a hostile environment existed at Surya Enterprises Unlimited.

Rebecca West claimed she left her job because she was afraid for her safety and did not want to become a victim of physical abuse by Devra West. But hearing officer Peggy Harper found "the evidence does not establish verbal, emotional or spiritual abuse." Rebecca West won two earlier hearings and has appealed Harper's decision.

Reynolds also claims John Watson, a former business consultant for Devra West who now lives in Nova Scotia, has been spreading false allegations about Devra West by e-mail, phone calls and his Web site, www.universalteachings.com.

Devra West has filed a libel suit against Watson, but Watson said he has not yet been served. Reynolds said West is also trying to get Watson's Internet-service provider to take down Watson's Web site, noting that its URL is very similar to West's, www.universalteachings.org.

Both Cole and Rebecca West say they have been interviewed several times by agents from the Internal Revenue Service, which they say is investigating West's businesses.

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