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Linda Stanley's ineptitude haunts the triple murder trial of Hanme Clark

Although Linda Stanley was removed from office last November, her inability to handle any caseload is now haunting a triple murder trial in Custer County. While new District Attorney Jeff Lindsey has moved swiftly to rebuild the District Attorney's Office (DA) in the wake of Stanley's ineptitude, it was not enough to prevent District Judge Lauren Swan from sanctioning the DA's Office in the prosecution of Hanme Clark and reopen the preliminary hearing set for Tuesday, May 21, which will allow for additional cross-examination of evidence and witnesses that were not available in the defense of Clark in early 2024.

Judge Swan said that the defense's cross-examination would have gone differently if body-worn camera footage and other testimony had been made available to the defense at the time.

Linda Stanley was notorious for not filing documents with the courts in a timely manner, and often, she failed to file anything at all, leaving frustrated judges no other choice but to sanction her cases with severe penalties. Most notorious of all was Stanley's failure to send the defense of Barry Morphew, who was suspected of murdering his wife in Salida in 2020, a list of the expert witnesses on the eve of the long-awaited murder trial. Ultimately, Judge Ramsey Lama found that the repeated discovery violations amounted to "trial by ambush." Key in Judge Lama's ruling was that he did not see the pattern to be willful, but it was simply a pattern of Stanley's that he had no choice but to punish. Judge Lama's ruling, that most of the expert witnesses were not allowed, forced Stanley to dismiss the charges against Morphew.

District Attorney Lindsey acknowledged the issue, "This is the type of case that requires significant oversight, and that didn't happen." For most of 2024, Stanley was almost never seen at the DA's Office, and the staff was generally completely leaderless until she was disbarred by the Colorado Supreme Court and removed in November. Lindsey stated as well, "If this case had proceeded (under Stanley), this could have been another Morphew," meaning that the charges would have been dismissed against Clark.

However, the problems with discovery and evidence are not all the result of Stanley's incompetence. As noted in the *Tribune* before, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has been dealing with a considerable backlog of evidence to process due to a former CBI Scientist, Missy Woods, who specialized in DNA evidence, being accused of falsifying reports and court testimony over the past 20 years. Now, the CBI is reopening thousands of cases and retesting DNA, which has created a backlog of evidence needing to be processed (Woods was arrested and charged with 102 felonies in January). Clark's defense is still waiting for the discovery of ballistics, DNA, and serology, with the trial looming in June.

Another complicating factor is that the defense made it clear that they want to cross-examine former Custer County Deputy Jason Salbato, as he was one of the first deputies to take complaints about Clark before the incident took place in November of 2023. Salbato was likely wrongfully arrested after an investigator with Linda Stanley's Office filed an affidavit, and then Stanley filed an arrest warrant for Salbato in March 2024. The affidavit erroneously claimed that Salbato had not reported an instance of possible child abuse. The reality was that Salbato was the officer investigating the report. The court dismissed all charges, and the case was sealed, but by that time, the Custer County Sheriff's Office had fired Salbato instead of placing him on standard administrative leave. Judging by Stanley's constant incompetence, it is clear from the dismissed charges that Salbato should never have been arrested in the first place.

Last, Custer County's Sheriff's Office completely turned over most of its staff in 2023 when newly elected Sheriff Rich Smith took over the office. One of his hires was Detective Sargent Elizabeth Robinson, who was in charge of evidence reports. Much of the confusion about discovery in 2023 stemmed from each department working on the investigation using different numbering and filing systems. The District Attorney's Office used one system, Custer County was using essentially two systems (its existing system and the system Robinson used when she worked in Colorado Springs), and the new DA worked to get everyone to use the same system in November of 2024. According to statements made during the Tuesday hearing, most of those issues have been worked out, and the District Attorney's Office and the Custer County Sheriff's Office now use the same numbering system.

Two motion hearings have been set for the case on April 1 at 10:30 a.m. and another on May 6 at 1:30 p.m. at the Custer County Courthouse.

After the discovery questions were concluded, Clark's Attorney asked for a reduction in the bond from $2 million to $250,000. However, several victims spoke, asking the judge not to let Clark out of jail. The judge refused to drop the $2 million bond, and Clark will remain in the Pueblo County Jail.

The trial for Clark is scheduled to start on June 16 and last for two weeks at the Custer County Court House. The *Tribune* will continue to update this story.

– Jordan Hedberg



Dozens of Hereford calves warmed themselves in the morning sun last week at the Coleman Ranch to the south of Westcliffe. Ken and Suzanne Colelman are the proud owners of Coleman Herefords, and they specialize in breeding Hereford cattle that thrive in the high-altitude of the Wet Mountain Valley. In particular, they focus on color pigmentation around the eyes that helps reduce damage from sun glare and wind particles. Ken is the nephew of former rancher Stan Colemen, whose photo is featured in this week's Peaks of the Past column.

– Tribune photo by Jordan Hedberg

Experienced natural food grocer expands local food options at Sunflower Market

For Steven and Hannah Zimmerman, the new owners of Sunflower Natural Foods in downtown Westcliffe, the long-desired opportunity to own their own family grocery came unexpectedly. Serendipity, mixed with an extensive career in grocery and natural food distribution, has allowed the Zimmermans to quickly expand offerings at the little grocery store, which has impressed regular and new customers alike over the past few months.

Having access to healthy, natural, and local food has long been a difficult proposition for residents and are often forced to drive hundred-mile round trips "down the hill" to find healthy grocery and supplement options. But for those in the know, Sunflower Natural Foods has always been a beacon of health in a sea of processed food options.

Now, Steven is bringing his decades of experience in grocery store management and health food distribution to the little store on Main Street. "It all started in Ohio right when I got out of college and started working at a natural food store that got bought by a chain," Steven explained, "When that sold to a chain, I moved to a company that was trying to make more of its store natural-based. It was a conventional store, and my role was to transition some of the business to natural, so I was their natural foods director. I had to develop a natural program in all the departments from the ground up." From that point on, Steven was fully invested in the grocery business.

"Over the years, I have worked in all parts of grocery stores and distribution. I did a stint with Trader Joe's, which was a lot of fun, and after that, I joined KeHE, which is a specialty and organic bulk food distributor. In my time with the company, I probably brought at least 20 brands into the company."

When working remotely for KeHE in the Wet Mountain Valley, the Zimmermans discovered the little local natural food store was for sale. "I had always thought that later in my career, I would start a little grocery store. I did not think the opportunity would come so soon!"

Because of his experience onboarding local food producers, Steven has already been able to start offering high-quality food from producers in the region. Examples include the fresh greens from Jamber Acres, the excellent goat cheeses from Westcliffe Cheese, and health products from Willow Wind Farms. "We have only owned the store since November, and we are just getting started!"

So, check out the advertisement on page 2 for store hours and show them your support!

– Jordan Hedberg



Photo on right: the Zimmerman Family is in front of their new store: from back left to right, Jocelyn, Hannah, Cora, Steven, Mia (front left), Laila, Adi, and Juliana in front.

– Courtesy photo