

Scientologists try to prevent man's leaving

By DAVID DAHL
Clearwater Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — Members of the Church of Scientology prevented a man's cab from leaving the church's headquarters Monday afternoon until police arrived, Clearwater police said.

They said William B. Wilson, 69, a businessman from Midland, Texas, left in the taxi minutes after police responded to a complaint at the church's headquarters at 210 S Fort Harrison Ave.

Wilson does not want criminal charges filed in the incident, according to Lt. Terry Byrd. And a church spokesman has labeled the incident a "misunderstanding."

Wilson could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Pinellas County Commissioner Gabe Cazares said Wednesday that he wants the Pinellas-Pasco state attorney's office to investigate the incident. Cazares said he was particularly upset because of Wilson's age.

STATE ATTORNEY James T. Russell said Wednesday he hadn't heard about the incident. When a reporter explained what had happened, Russell said he wanted to hear more to determine whether to investigate.

"I would be interested, frankly," in hearing more details, Russell said.

Police did not say who called them to the scene of the 4 p.m. incident, but they gave this account:

Officers arrived at the church's garage to find the path of a Clearwater Yellow taxi blocked by a car, which was driven by Henry C. Billings. Billings, 64, who is staying at the church, told officers he blocked the cab at the instruction of a "Mr. Alexander." A church spokesman later identified Rick Alexander as the church supervisor who was involved in the incident.

Police said a small pickup truck also was used to block the cab. However, the pickup truck left before police could question the occupants.

WILSON WAS NOT in the cab when police arrived. He was found outside the garage sitting with another person who lives at the church.

Wilson asked the man he was sitting with if he could leave and the man said he could, police said. Officers asked Wilson if he wanted to leave and he replied yes, according to a police report.

Wilson told police he did not want to file a complaint regarding the incident. After giving officers his name, Wilson entered the cab to be taken to Tampa International Airport.

Church spokesman Hugh Wilhere said Wilson is a frequent visitor to the church. He said the incident Monday concerns a "personal" dispute between Wilson and Alexander.

"It's a matter of (Wilson's) privacy, and I don't want to violate it," Wilhere said Wednesday.

Wilson did not return a reporter's telephone messages left at his Texas home and business Wednesday.)

"He'll be back," Wilhere said. "He's been coming down here for years."

Ex-Scientologist goes on hunger strike

By PEGGY ROGERS
Clearwater Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — A former Scientologist who turned against the church says she is on a hunger strike to protest its harassment of her. The church tried to involve her in a wild hotel party and followed her daughter to school, she charged.

"I felt totally boxed in. I got tired of them harassing me so I decided I'd just step right back on their ground and confront them face to face," said LaVenda Van Schiack, who has lived in several states and recently moved to the bay area.

Ms. Van Schiack, 33, began her protest Tuesday evening in downtown Clearwater, the church's national headquarters. She paced the sidewalk outside church buildings carrying a yellow poster announcing her hunger strike plans and calling Scientologists "sickos."

SITTING ON a downtown bench Wednesday, she said she will continue her hunger strike until her longstanding lawsuit against the church goes to court.

The suit's trial, to be held in Boston, was tentatively set for late February but may be delayed, according to Harvey Silverglate, a Church of Scientology attorney.

The church considers Ms. Van Schiack's hunger strike a publicity maneuver and an annoyance, said Silverglate.

"Surely she's not serious about not eating until late February even," he said. "She has said many really bizarre things."

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— LaVenda Van Schiack

Ms. Van Schiack said she plans to coordinate her on-street protests so she still will be able to sleep and see her daughter.

The church's harassment campaign has taken many forms, according to Ms. Van Schiack. Since she left the church about four years ago, she said, church members have bothered her employers, doctored information to make her look bad and called her friends and relatives with frightening messages.

"THERE'VE BEEN so many phone calls it would be useless for me to even talk about them," she said. Many of the calls have centered on her 13-year-old daughter, she said.

Her lawsuit against the church seeks several million dollars for the trouble she claims to have suffered.

A few local Scientologists have bothered her, she said, since she started her strike, while others simply questioned her about her views. She said only one thing would halt her strike: "If every single member of the Church of Scientology walked out, then I'd stop."