

Clearwater Sun

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Sect member lectured after sidewalk incident

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A bicycling security guard with the Church of Scientology may have overstepped his bounds Wednesday morning when he confronted a pedestrian in downtown Clearwater who "looked suspicious," according to police.

The guard, Curtis Lee Nelson, later told police he confronted the man "to see what he was all about."

What it turned out to be about, according to police, was essentially a sidewalk shakedown on the part of a Scientologist, who got a short lecture from the investigating officer about civil rights and the proper roles of authority.

The call that initially went into the Clearwater Police Department had Nelson being threatened with a knife by the pedestrian.

When Officer Robert Milliron arrived at about 6:20 a.m. he met up with Nelson and the supposed "assailant," Joseph F. Liotta, a 36-year-old transient.

Liotta had a very different account of the preceding events to give police. He told Milliron that as he walked past a Scientology building at 101 N. Fort Harrison Ave., Nelson approached on the bicycle and began "harassing" him.

According to reports, Liotta told police the tactics are nothing new and that sect members "always harass him when he walks by their buildings even though he is on a public sidewalk" and he "is tired of it."

In defense Wednesday, police said, Liotta made "some covert moves" in an attempt to scare Nelson away. Af-

ter the report of a knife, reports state, Milliron patted down Liotta and found nothing more dangerous than a watch band.

Nelson replied that he saw something but did not know what it could have been.

Nelson also told police "the guy looked suspicious and he just wanted to see what he was all about," according to Milliron's report.

At that point, police said, Milliron asked Nelson why all the caution when Liotta clearly was on public property and did not do anything to arouse suspicion.

Nelson "stated he is supposed to protect Scientology property," the police report states.

Milliron pointed out to Nelson that it is the job of police, and police only, to check out suspicious people.

And since Nelson could not tell the officer "even one thing the suspect did that was illegal and gave no good reason to even approach the suspect," Milliron told the guard "that all persons have a right" to walk freely on city property "and if they aren't breaking any law to leave them alone."

Sect spokesman Richard Haworth said he could not comment on the incident until he heard Nelson's side of it.

Haworth did say sect security men are charged with the same responsibilities as guards in other businesses such as banks or department stores and there have been "a number of occasions in which Mr. Nelson and other security people have assisted police."