

LGBTQ activist in hiding after she was attacked on the Kenai Peninsula

By **Rashah McChesney, KTOO - Juneau** - December 30, 2019



Tammie Willis staffs a Pride table during Pride in the Park in 2019 in Soldotna, Alaska. (Photo courtesy Tammie Willis)

A Kenai Peninsula woman is in hiding after a violent assault in her Sterling home.

Tammie Willis said she's being targeted because she's gay and wants other people in the LGBTQ community on the Kenai Peninsula to be warned that they could be danger.

The first sign of trouble came on Nov. 14, she said. She left a gym in Soldotna and she noticed that a piece of notebook paper had been shoved under the hood of her red pickup truck

She unfolded it to find a profanity-laced note, a homophobic slur and a threat.

Willis said she was shocked, but she didn't take it seriously.

"I was just like, who does this in this time? It's 2019. Who is seriously doing this? My wife had to convince me that I needed to take it to the police station," she said.

She took it to the Soldotna police.

"He took a picture of the letter and told me that it was written by a coward and that cowards rarely follow up on their threats," Willis said.

But, about a week later, she was driving to work along her usual route and she saw a truck parked in the shadows along the road.



(Photo courtesy of Tammie Willis)

"It looked like there was a figure in the back of the truck. And as I approached it, I was trying to kind of get an idea of what the guy was doing in the back of the truck," Willis said. "I saw him raise his hands over his head and then the next thing I know, my windshield shattered."

She swerved, got control of the truck and kept driving until she got to Kenai Peninsula College, where she works as the Associate Director of Residence Life. She called the Soldotna police again, this time a different officer responded. Willis said, it felt like she was being stalked. But, the officer she talked to told her it was random.

“That it wasn’t connected to the letter, even though I told him about the letter. His reasoning was that it was dark out and there’s no way that anyone would have known that was my truck if I was being targeted,” she said.

After the note, she’d stopped going to the gym. She changed her habits again after her windshield was shattered. She stopped going to work at the same time every morning. She took different roads to get there.

But, a few weeks later, she was getting ready for work in her home in Sterling. She remembers that she’d just put her shoes on. The power went out. She walked out through her garage to see if her neighbor’s power was out and someone pushed her back into the garage.

She fell. As she was trying to get up, she felt a burning sensation in her arm. Then something sharp pressed against her chest.

“I grabbed the thing and it turned out that it was a knife that cut my hand,” she said.

The stabbing stopped but then her attacker started punching her. Her head bounced off of the cement. Her glasses flew off. She said the attack lasted for several minutes.

“Then all of the sudden it just stopped and he left,” Willis said.

Her wounds are extensive. It took 20 staples to close the cuts in her left arm. She has stitches in her breast. She has a concussion. Dark purple bruises balloon across her legs, stomach and face.

This time it was Alaska State Troopers who responded. She told them about the note.

They followed the blood trail in her garage and found the knife she was stabbed with.

Trooper spokesperson Ken Marsh said that investigation is still open. No one has been arrested.

Meanwhile, Willis has left her home. Her world has gotten much smaller.

“I feel like I’m always looking over my shoulder. I don’t go anywhere without an escort. In a lot of ways, I feel like I’m in prison because I don’t have have freedom of movement like I used to,” she said.

To her, it’s clear that the note, the windshield, the stabbing — they’re all linked. Each happened as planning for a local LGBTQ-friendly event called Pride in the Park is ramping up. She’s widely known as an organizer for that event.

She is frustrated with how long the investigations are taking — though she’s careful to say that she doesn’t feel discriminated against by law enforcement. But that frustration boiled over and she made a Facebook post on Christmas Eve. It has been shared almost 6,000 times. Many in the comments are calling it a hate crime.

But, it’s not that clear-cut for law enforcement. Soldotna police have already closed their investigations into the first two incidents. They don’t know who did it.

And they didn’t investigate as a hate crime.

“We investigated it as a criminal mischief, the first one with the note would be like a suspicious incident — the other one would be a criminal mischief,” said Soldotna Police Chief Pete Mlynarik.

It's difficult in Alaska to prosecute a hate crime. In fact, it's not really a crime you can commit at all. It's essentially something that gets tacked on to another crime and can affect how harsh a penalty is.

Also, sexual orientation is not protected under state criminal law. The statute lists race, sex, color, creed, physical or mental disability, ancestry or national origin.

All that aside, Willis says she wants LGBTQ communities on the Kenai Peninsula to be warned that there's a threat.

Mlynarik said he's not ready to do that, in part because it's not clear if someone has something against Willis specifically or with the whole LGBTQ community.

"To say a whole community is at risk, you know you don't want to alarm somebody for any reason, regardless of that circumstance or another one if you don't have all the facts out there," he said.

Meanwhile, Willis is still — essentially — in hiding. She goes to work at Kenai Peninsula College, but she stays in places where people don't have easy access to her.

She said she's in an uncomfortable position — to be so clearly in danger, but also to feel responsible for informing her friends and the queer community on the Kenai Peninsula that they could be in danger.

In response to the attack, Pride in the Park has organized a **townhall meeting** on Jan. 4 at 2:30 p.m. at the Soldotna Public Library. They're inviting elected officials and law enforcement and hoping to talk about safety in the LGBTQ community on the Kenai Peninsula.

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