



Photo courtesy Tammie Willis Tammie Willis' smashed window can be seen here Nov. 22 in Soldotna.

'I don't want it to be about me'

After series of attacks, local woman fears LGBTQ community is being targeted.

By Brian Mazurek

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This article contains descriptions of events that may be disturbing to some readers.

Over the past two months, Tammie Willis — an employee of Kenai Peninsula College and a local advocate for LGBTQ rights — has experienced several instances of harassment and violence that led her to believe she is being targeted as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Willis is a member of the LGBT Alliance at the college and also one of the organizers for the annual [Soldotna Pride in the Park](#) event, which coincides with other Pride marches around the country to commemorate the 1969 New York City Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement.

The first incident occurred on Nov. 14, a few days after the first planning meeting for next year's Pride March had been announced publicly, when Willis said someone left a note on her truck that contained homophobic slurs and threats of harm that ended with a warning to "Take it some where else before you get hurt!!!"

Then on Nov. 22, the day after that first planning meeting took place, someone threw a large object at Willis' truck and smashed her windshield as she was driving on Poppy Lane near the Kenai Peninsula College.

And on Dec. 9, Willis was attacked in her home by someone wielding a knife. The attack, which was reported by Alaska State Troopers in their daily dispatches four days later on Dec. 13, sent her to the hospital with cuts and bruises on her arms, legs and stomach.

The assault on Willis in her home took place two days after the second Pride planning meeting had been announced publicly.

"I mean it is an assumption; I can't say it is because I'm gay," Willis said. "But when you look at it within the context of the note and the activities and the timeline, it definitely lends itself to looking like it's targeted."

Willis, who said she was reluctant to go public with the attack, is now speaking out — first at a local organizing meeting for Soldotna Pride on Dec. 19 and then in a [public Facebook post](#) on Dec. 24.

Willis said she decided to come forward for the sake of those in the LGBTQ community who may not have the same resources that she does.

“I want the LGBTQ community to know that there’s somebody out there who may or may not be targeting them,” Willis said. “And while most people in the LGBTQ community tend to be very cautious, they need to be hyper-vigilant cautious. And if anybody has shared experience or have been harassed, they really need to come forward. Because it’s not going to stop until they do.”

The attack

On the morning of Dec. 9, Willis was getting ready for work as she always does at her home in Sterling. At about 6:30 a.m., winter storms knocked out Willis’ power along with the rest of her neighborhood and many other parts of the Kenai Peninsula. When Willis stepped outside her garage to investigate the outage, she said she was immediately shoved back into her garage and onto the ground by an unknown assailant who had been standing outside.

“He tried to stab me at one point, I think,” Willis said while recalling the incident. “I grabbed the knife and pushed it away. So I ended up with cuts on my hand and on my breast.”

Willis said she was able to get back up after being initially pushed to the ground, but with no power and no daylight the garage was too dark for her to get a good look at her attacker. Willis said that she believed her attacker was a man, but the only other distinguishing feature she was able to identify while being assaulted was the attacker’s smell.

“I could tell he had a really bad body odor. I mean really rank,” Willis said. “He felt like he was taller than I was, and he felt like he was a little on the thick side. Not fat, but definitely not skinny.”

Willis is deaf, so she relies heavily on her ability to see. Because the power had gone out moments before, Willis said she was not able to learn much about her attacker.

“He could have said something, but unless I can see your face and lip-read you, I wouldn’t necessarily know,” Willis said. “I didn’t hear a truck pull up, I didn’t hear any of the things that might have warned me something was

going on.”

Willis said that she was worried he was going to kill her, and thinks that he may have if he had been able to see more clearly.

“I had my arm up, blocking, and I was trying to step back, but at one point I felt it (the knife) and it felt like it was penetrating my chest. And that’s when I pushed it away,” Willis said. “I honestly think that if the lights had been on, and he could see me, I’d probably be dead. I think the only thing that saved me was the fact that the power did go out.”

After the knife had been knocked out of his hands, the attacker continued punching her in the side and the face before eventually getting up and leaving, Willis said.

Willis immediately called 911 and contacted her wife — who was working in Anchorage at the time — and her friends to let them know what had happened.

“Being in the dark as a deaf person is very disorienting ... I don’t even know how to describe it, but I was in a dark room. I couldn’t hear. I couldn’t see. I knew the door was open, but I didn’t know if he was still there or not,” Willis said.

Willis was still in shock when one of her friends arrived to check on her. Shortly after that, her friends Leslie and Nate Byrd arrived, and they had to direct the State Troopers — who Byrd said were looking for her in the wrong part of the neighborhood — to Willis’ home.

“In all fairness, I couldn’t remember my house address,” Willis said.

Willis was taken to Central Peninsula Hospital to be treated for her injuries. Pictures that Willis shared with the Clarion and later publicly on Facebook showed that Willis had cuts on her arms, some as big as 3 inches in length, stab wounds on her chest, a head injury from hitting the garage floor and bruises all over her body.

After the attack at her home, Willis spoke to troopers, who posted the [dispatch](#) for the incident on Willis four days after the attack occurred. Willis’ name is not mentioned in the dispatch, and the incident was listed as an “assault/burglary.”

Troopers did not find the attacker that day, and according to the Department of Public Safety's Public Information Officer Ken Marsh the investigation is ongoing and is being approached as an isolated incident.

Willis said she hasn't spoken with troopers since the initial interview the day after the attack.

Trenton Harris, the State Trooper investigating the case, told the Clarion on Dec. 23 that the event was classified as an assault/burglary because it falls under the [statutory definition](#) of that crime — a person unlawfully entering a building with the intent to commit a crime. The attack is not currently being investigated as a hate crime, and Harris said that the hate crime classification is an "aggravator" that is added to the initial charges during the trial process, not during the investigation. Under [current Alaska law](#), sexual orientation is not included as a protected category in regards to hate crimes.

Harris also said that the troopers have been in contact with the Soldotna Police Department — which handled the previous two incidents — since the investigation began. Soldotna Police Chief Peter Mlynarik said on Dec. 26 that the case of the threatening note has been closed and the case of the smashed windshield is currently being reviewed to determine if any further action is needed before closing it. No suspects were arrested or charged in either case, Mlynarik said. Mlynarik did not specify why the original case regarding the note had been closed.

Willis' neighbor has a security camera that faces Willis' garage, but due to the power outage the footage wouldn't show the moments of the attack, only the time leading up to it, Willis said.

Willis said that troopers are still working on obtaining the footage from her neighbor, and she hopes that it will shed some light on the investigation. Harris said that, as of Dec. 23, they have not yet reviewed the neighbor's security footage.

Willis said that troopers found the knife that they believe her attacker had used during the initial investigation. Willis said she believes the attacker was unable to recover the knife due to the darkness. As of Dec. 23, the knife had not been sent to the Alaska State Crime Lab in Anchorage for analysis, Harris said.

Community support

Since the attack, Willis has been staying at another location out of fear of returning to her home. Willis has friends and coworkers who have kept a close eye on her, and she doesn't go anywhere alone. Willis said that she feels as safe as she could possibly be, given the circumstances.

"I have the privilege of having these resources, and I think it's ... I think I need to use my privilege in a way that's going to maybe make the LGBTQ community realize that they need to be safer. They need to be more cautious and more careful," Willis said. "If I was anybody but me, I'd probably be dead."

The second Pride planning meeting took place on Thursday, Dec. 19, and that was when Willis shared her story with some of the organizers for the first time. The reactions were a mix of anger, frustration, empathy and determination.

Some offered Willis a place to stay and extended that invitation to any others who have been targeted for their identity. After Willis had spoken, the conversation shifted to what could be done to raise awareness in the community about violence and harassment towards the LGBTQ community. The organizers made plans to arrange some sort of town hall or public meeting where individuals who have faced targeted harassment can speak directly to local law enforcement and elected representatives about their experiences. Sen. Peter Micciche, R-Soldotna, spoke to the Clarion on Dec. 26 after hearing about the assault, and said he would be interested in attending "any town hall related to the safety of our citizens."

"What happened to Tammie is horrifying," Micciche said. "If anyone knows anything about this, please come forward so that we can find who did this."

Micciche said that he has been in contact with Willis and local law enforcement and expressed his confidence that the troopers and Soldotna police are "aggressively" investigating the incidents.

Willis said she would continue to advocate for the LGBTQ community and wants to shift the focus from what happened to her to preventing an attack on anyone else.

“I don’t want it to be about me,” Willis said. “I want it to be about helping the LGBTQ community find safety, or at least acknowledging the lack of safety on the peninsula.”

The Soldotna Pride in the Park organizers have scheduled a [town hall](#) revolving around the topic of LGBTQ Safety that will take place on Jan. 4 at the Soldotna Public Library from 2:30 to 5:45 p.m. and is open to the public. In the meantime, individuals who feel unsafe can call 907-262-0257, which is a dedicated, 24-hour line at KPC that will provide support and resources.



Brian Mazurek / Peninsula Clarion Tammie Willis is seen here at Kenai Peninsula College on Dec. 19. The bandage on her arm covers some of the cuts Willis received while being attacked at her home Dec. 9.

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