



Drive-in

A group of Cherokee car enthusiasts parked classics in front of the Swezey's Hamburger Shop in downtown Cherokee this past week for a photo op. The photograph was printed and mounted by Gary and Connie Olsen and presented to John Kledis, a 1965 Cherokee graduate, who is responsible for a complete historic renovation of the popular eatery. The Olsens spearheaded the idea to show Kledis the community's appreciation for his efforts to bring back the Swezey burgers. Photo By DENNY HOLTON

STEPHENS: Cited with 47 policy violations, according to lawsuit

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without any investigation or reprimands.” Scott declined comment on the lawsuit. County Attorney Ryan Kolpin, who was named in the lawsuit, but not as a plaintiff or defendant, didn’t respond to a request for comment. The county and Scott have yet to formally respond to the lawsuit in court.

SOURING RELATIONSHIP

And years of “discriminatory treatment”

Stephens was hired as a dispatcher for the county communications center in 2018. She was promoted to deputy the following year, becoming the first female law enforcement officer in the county’s history. Scott was elected sheriff the year after. The lawsuit claims Scott started targeting her two years after he was elected. It allegedly began when Stephens purchased a K9 Malinois puppy named Vulcan. She claims she financed the dog herself. And that Scott dictated the terms of the dog’s training. The lawsuit noted Scott didn’t want the dog to indicate to marijuana. Scott told her that she wouldn’t be reimbursed for her costs to train Vulcan and that she’d receive an additional half-hour of compensation time for each day she handled the dog. Around the same time, the county transitioned three Cherokee police officers from the city to the sheriff’s office, according to the lawsuit. One of the transitioned officers was a K9 handler. The transitioned officer was allegedly paid more for the same K9 work. Stephens also claimed she was concerned about the difference in the K9’s abilities relative to Vulcan. “In fact, multiple deputies approached (Stephens) about how (the transitioned offi-

cer’s K9 did not perform well at training and were concerned that (the transitioned officer’s) K9 was falling short,” the lawsuit reads. “(Stephens) also learned that (the transitioned officer’s) K9 certification had lapsed. (Stephens) notified Sheriff Scott of those issues.” She was then placed under investigation for workplace misconduct, the lawsuit alleges, for an incident occurring in 2020. She allegedly called another deputy a “douchebag.” “Such an allegation went unfounded and arose out of questionable reports,” the lawsuit reads. Stephens alleged that a male deputy derisively referred to another deputy as “deputy douchebag” in front of a group while at training. The male deputy who allegedly made the remark was never reprimanded or investigated, according to the lawsuit. It was reported to Sheriff Scott and the county’s human relations department at the time. She claims she was investigated again for an alleged inaccuracy on her timecard while other male deputies also submitted inaccurate timecards, but were never investigated or reprimanded. “After the 2022 investigation, Sheriff Scott began routinely searching for complaints against (Stephens),” the lawsuit claims. “(Stephens) heard from several coworkers that Sheriff Scott specifically solicited (Stephens’) coworkers for any complaints about (Stephens).” Stephens alleged she was ordered to take an online class about professionalism after an April 2024 email altercation with a dispatcher. Stephens claims she told the dispatcher to “do her job” after she learned the dispatcher didn’t email information needed for an exchange with the Cherokee County Attorney’s Office. The dispatcher complained to Sheriff Scott. The online class was imposed. The dispatcher wasn’t required to take any additional training. Two months later, Stephens told a coworker she felt that Sheriff Scott “didn’t have the

deputies’ back.” Stephens was referencing a comment Scott made to the Cherokee Chronicle Times over two deputies’ alleged mishandling of a search warrant on North Fifth Street in Cherokee. The incident resulted in a lawsuit by the occupant, Dustin Konrady, and a \$40,000 settlement. Scott told the Chronicle Times the officers were disciplined. Stephens claimed they were sent to training for search and seizure and ordered to meet internally regarding the incident, but they weren’t disciplined. Scott suspended her for a day after he heard about the comment. And she was also investigated for “texting and driving.” The witness to the incident, the lawsuit alleges, were both family friends of Sheriff Scott. “Ultimately, between the texting and driving and the comment about not having the deputies’ backs, Sheriff Scott cited (Stephens) with 47 different policy violations,” the lawsuit reads. It noted that no investigation was launched over a complaint involving a male deputy who was allegedly texting and driving, nearly causing a collision. “These were more policy violations than any of (Stephens’) male coworkers have received for any similar violations.” During a subsequent name-clearing hearing, Stephens claimed she was texting a confidential informant from her work phone. Scott ultimately found she committed a moving violation. Scott allegedly asked her if she wanted to resign. She refused. Stephens claimed witness statements of the alleged texting-and-driving incident were typed himself and that deputies were pressured to sign them. Stephens claims she met with County Attorney Ryan Kolpin, who found that the alleged policy violations weren’t strong enough to warrant termination. Stephens claimed Kolpin notified the county’s human resources coordinator of his analysis.

Kolpin didn’t respond to an email requesting comment on the matter. Stephens claimed she was also passed over for promotions and that other female candidates who passed the county’s civil service certification weren’t hired in favor of male candidates. “(Stephens) is still the only female deputy in Cherokee County history,” the lawsuit reads.

A MESSY TERMINATION

And a libel charge

Stephens was no longer employed by the county. But she was appealing her firing to the Cherokee County Civil Service Commission, which ultimately ended in a \$28,000 settlement and her retaining ownership of Vulcan. The board of supervisors signed a document that indicated she was terminated for misconduct. The document is a standard form for all employees who separate employment from the county — a check box list indicates the ways in which the employee departed. The document’s check box indicated that she was terminated for misconduct. The Cherokee Chronicle Times obtained it and published its contents. Stephens claimed she never admitted to misconduct through her appeal to the civil service commission. “The Cherokee County Board of Supervisors’ statement about misconduct was published in a local newspaper, which also caused (Stephens) to struggle to find other law-enforcement positions,” the lawsuit reads. Stephens’ lawsuit charges the county and Scott with libel per se, sex discrimination, retaliation, violation of equal pay, false light-invasion of privacy, blacklisting and violation of the fair labor standards act. Zach Greder, a Sioux City attorney representing Stephens, asked a judge to empanel a jury to hear the lawsuit at trial.



left: Sandy Peters with a geocache she put in her front yard named Three’s Company. Middle: Inside the Three’s Company geocache. Right: Pieces of geocaches planned to be hidden around Cherokee County. Below: Inside the Dudley dodo Doo-Doo geocache alongside Peters’s house. CHRONICLE TIMES photos by CARTER SOYER



Hike-n-Seek: A treasure hunt

Statewide geocaching event in Cherokee County this weekend

BY CARTER SOYER

Sandy Peters of Cherokee has been geocaching for almost three years. In those three years her enthusiasm for geocaching has taken her on countless adventures, including an Alaskan cruise and European cruise she went on for geocaching. Peters is bringing her joy for geocaching to the Cherokee community Sept. 18-21 with Hike-n-Seek, an annual statewide geocaching event. Peters adventures in geocaching started like this: “My sister and I had an event over in eastern Iowa for sewing, and she goes, ‘Well, why don’t you come with me? We could do some geocaching,’” Peters said. “And what should have took us, you know, maybe four hours, five hours to drive home took us like twelve.” For those unaware, geocaching involves going out and looking for a con-

tainer with a paper log inside where an individual signs their name certifying they have found the geocache. However, geocaches aren’t always as easy to find. Containers for the geocache can be as small as a fingernail or require solving a riddle or two to be found. With that, the geocaching phenomenon extends further than the United States. “Geocaching is a worldwide treasure hunt,” Peters said. “It’s in all parts of the world, except North Korea I believe.” As the name of the event entails Hike-n-Seek will feature a county wide geocaching hunt on Saturday. Peters noted Saturday won’t be a day to learn about geocaching and participants are encouraged to have prior knowledge of geocaching for the activities that day. Hike-n-Seek has a history being an annual statewide event hosted in September by the Iowa Geocachers Organization since 2004, according to their website. In 2004 the inaugural Hike-n-Seek featured Black Hawk County with Cedar Falls being the main location. In preparation for the event there have been a total of about 450 geocaches hidden around Cherokee County. The new geocaches add to the 200 geocaches al-

ready in the county bringing the total to about 650. Unlike the hunt on Saturday, there are other events during Hike-n-Seek that require no prior knowledge of geocaching. Some of them include lunch clubs on Thursday and Friday and a free-will supper Saturday night. Peters plans for geocachers from not only all over the state but some from around the Midwest as well in attendance. “We have a bunch of geocachers from all over Iowa, some from Minnesota, from Nebraska, South Dakota, and maybe some from Missouri, going to this event,” she said. To host Hike-n-Seek Peters and other geocachers from Cherokee County worked together to create a petition to host this year’s Hike-n-Seek. Peters wants to inform community members to be aware that if they see someone stopped on the side of the road during the days of Hike-n-Seek it’s probably for a geocache. Regardless of geocaching knowledge or skill Hike-n-Seek is open to everyone in the public. “People that do it are all walks of life and educational backgrounds and everything,” said Peters, “so, we’re all out for one thing.”



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