

## Supporters make a 'stand' for former APMS principal Doty

By **MARC VALERO**  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — A large group of supporters of Chris Doty attended Tuesday's meeting of the School Board of Highlands County with a few voicing concerns about the investigation and motives of the accuser that led to his removal as principal of Avon Park Middle School.

About 20 people wearing gray T-shirts that read "I STAND WITH DOTY" took a seat in the Garland

Boggus Board Room with six speaking in support of Doty.

One teacher who worked at a school where Doty was principal spoke against him.

Doty was principal of Hill-Gustat Middle School when he was transferred to head Avon Park Middle in February.

On Oct. 15, the district announced there would be a new principal at Avon Park Middle and Doty was offered a non-administrative position at the district office after an investigation revealed

that there is evidence to support allegations against him of sexual harassment in the workplace.

A public records request made by a resident to the district office led to an online posting of the investigator's report.

The firm Johnson Jackson PLLC, an employment defense council, working for the School District, hired an investigator after Avon Park Middle School Assistant Principal Danielle Lillpop



MARC VALERO/STAFF

A group of supporters of Chris Doty wait in the reception area of the district office waiting for Tuesday's meeting of the School Board of Highlands County.

DOTY | 5A

## Desoto case leads to continuances in Highlands

By **JOHN GUERRA**  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Several high-profile homicide cases were granted continuances for various reasons this week.

Three cases — those of capital defense lawyer Daniel Hernandez — were continued because he's in Desoto County this week defending Marian Williams, who is accused of killing three little boys in a 2017 Arcadia housefire.

A jury found Williams guilty last week. The penalty phase, which continued Wednesday, saw family members plea for her life. Hernandez asked them to share memories of Williams and describe her good side.

On Wednesday in Highlands County, Circuit Court Judge Peter Estrada held pretrial conferences for several high-profile homicide cases. Such conferences allow judges to hear how cases are progressing toward trial.

Here is a look at some of those key cases:

**Dennis Bent** — On April 16, 2020, Bent allegedly walked up to Christopher Reese of Avon Park as Reese sat on a wall. Two men working on a car nearby told investigators they saw the attacker fire at Bent. Investigators found .40-caliber shell casings at the scene; Reese was hit in the head, chest, back and thigh. Reese fell to the sidewalk in front of the wall and died.

Bent's case was to be heard on Wednesday, but his lawyer, Hernandez, was involved in a capital murder trial in Desoto County and could not be in Estrada's court. He was granted a continuance.

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives interviewed people who knew Reese as well as other witnesses. Bent allegedly told several people he had shot Reese, recounting accurately the injuries Reese suffered.

Detectives allegedly recorded Bent bragging about the shooting. Bent told the witness Reese owed his cousin money.

Bent is charged with second degree murder with a firearm and other crimes.

**Jimmy Ford** — Ford, who has aggravated battery with firearm arrests going back to 2010, lost his defense lawyer due to conflict of interest in late September.

Derek Christian of the Office of Criminal Conflict and Regional Counsel withdrew from the case on Sept. 29, leading Estrada to appoint Jennifer Powell, the seasoned defense lawyer, to the case.

Ford refilled a not-guilty plea and the case goes on, more than 17 months since he allegedly shot a man down in Avon Park.

Detectives sought Ford after reviewing a security video outside The Joint, an Avon Park bar, that allegedly showed Ford shooting at several victims.

According to witnesses, Ford fired his 9mm pistol at three men as he approached them outside the bar the night

CASES | 5A

## The Who I Am Foundation



COURTESY/ADVENTHEALTH

AdventHealth Sebring has been using the Who I Am Patient Support Kits in their COVID unit. The kits have been packaged by youth groups, including Beauty Fit for a Queen.

## Loss of family patriarch leads to helping others

By **ROMONA WASHINGTON**  
STAFF

AVON PARK — Don Serdyski loved the great outdoors and any adventure that came his way. A private pilot and an Air Force veteran, he was a long-time citrus grower. He and his wife loved camping and accomplished the goal of camping in all 50 states apart from Hawaii.

Then in July 2020, he was taken to the hospital with flu-like

symptoms as he struggled to breathe. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, he was alone when he left his home. Jo Ann, his wife of 62 years, nor his two daughters would ever hear his voice again because of a ventilator.

Don Serdyski, who was diagnosed



with the virus, wouldn't return home.

He died Aug. 15, 2020 at the age of 84.

Through the work of his family, though, his legacy lives on.

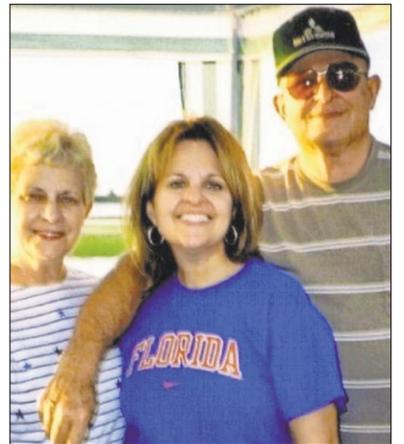
His wife and daughters were among the rare, lucky few who were able to suit up and go in to spend a few minutes

with her husband and father in the days just before his death. It just wasn't enough and before Don Serdyski's passing, the Who I Am



This is a mock up of a completed Patient Support Kit provided by Who I Am Foundation.

COURTESY/TRACY STITES



COURTESY/TRACY STITES

Don Serdyski loved the Florida Gators. Tim Lanier, the nurse in his final hours and a University of Florida alumni, spent time talking to him about the Gators because he found out about Serdyski's love of the Gators through pictures the family left in his room. In the photo with Don is his wife, Jo Ann, and oldest daughter, Tracy Stites.

Foundation began to take shape. Tracy Stites, Don's oldest daughter, said it was during those last five days that she and her mother, Joan, were allowed to place photocopied pictures in his room of those things her dad

FOUNDATION | 5A

## Serdyski honors dad's memory with new book

By **ROMONA WASHINGTON**  
STAFF

AVON PARK — While Jo Ann Serdyski and Tracy Stites do their work to honor Don Serdyski through the Who I Am Foundation, his younger daughter Kelly Ann Serdyski has written a book to remember and honor her dad.

Kelly, who is an early interventionist for a West Virginia school district, said she was only home for a week before having to return to work. "I left Florida angry that there would be no memorial to him (due to COVID-19 restric-



SERDYSKI

tions). He was such a great man," she said. Not only did she go home and start working on "Donald Bryan and His Amazing Swift Airplane," but she started a series. She said this book, her third, "is truly a story about my father, with an inspirational message for young people."

"I realized he was going to be in the Library of Congress, and I started to find peace in this," she



COURTESY/KELLY SERDYSKI

This book, "Donald Bryan And His Amazing Swift Airplane," was written and illustrated by Don Serdyski's younger daughter, Kelly. She had it published in memory and honor of her dad, who died last year of complications from COVID-19. It is available at Barnes and Noble.

said. Not only is the story written by Kelly,

but she is also the illustrator. "All of the artwork is

my own, done inside a little art studio in the forest. I got inspired to do my own illustrations when one of my children I work with drew me a picture. It was a circle and a line only on the paper, but when she told the story of what it was, it was a Unicorn having a birthday party for her friends. I realized that children don't expect perfect, they have the gift of imagination. My books are really whimsical and cute. Don't expect any graphic arts by a computer. You will see eraser marks, and even mistakes, but

BOOK | 5A



Classifieds.....B4-9 Obituaries.....A3 Viewpoints.....A6  
Comics.....B9-12 Sports.....B1 Weather.....A12  
Lottery.....A2 TV Listings.....A11

Good morning To  
Barry Long  
Thanks for reading!



# DOTY

FROM PAGE 1A

submitted a written complaint of sexual harassment discrimination and intimidation by Doty.

The investigator concluded there was substantial evidence to support Lillpop's allegations of sexual harassment in the workplace. Multiple witnesses corroborated her accusations and offered their own examples.

"While some of the witnesses gave evidence that questioned Ms. Lillpop's motives, none of the witnesses contradicted her allegations," the investigator stated. "In addition, the investigation demonstrated several other employees with individual complaints that were raised for the first time here."

"Finally, there are serious concerns about continuing misconduct and retaliation."

At Tuesday's School Board meeting, Jeremy Daugherty was first to speak in support of Doty.

"Doty was sent to an underperforming school with many, many issues to improve staff concerns, student behavior, academic performance and school culture and reputation."

"Was Miss Lillpop happy that Mr. Doty was there? No she was not," Daugherty told the School Board.

"In February of this year, both her husband and her expressed this to me as I am her neighbor living right next door," Daugherty said.

"Mr. Doty was clearly in trouble from 'day-one' based on what I know. Why? Because we're all in trouble when people go looking for things," he said.

"I read the report and have got to say, I was shocked at the lack of actual evidence in the report. For instance, a third employee reported

Mr. Doty regularly made sexual comments and jokes that she found inappropriate, but could not provide any examples," Daugherty said. "If these were so inappropriate, why can no one remember them?"

Melanie Bassetti, whose son attends Avon Park Middle, said Doty was reassigned by the superintendent to Avon Park Middle in the middle of the school year to be a no-nonsense figure at the school because of the lagging student performance and the low staff morale.

"He was very committed to improving our school," she said. "It was a huge boost for us to have him."

"Unfortunately, when he arrived at APMS he had inadvertently stepped into a landmine," Bassetti said.

One needs to imagine what it would be like for a person who all along wanted this principalship and applied for it and did not get it, only to end up as a subordinate to someone like Mr. Doty who is confident, strong, a proven leader with new ideas that differ from the status quo.

Bassetti asked if Doty's behavior was so inappropriate, why wasn't it reported to human resources earlier?

"I believe I know the answer to that. I believe this is an orchestrated hatchet job in order to remove him from the picture and I believe that was the intent all along," she said. Dr. Brenda Longshore, school superintendent, stated she made the decision to remove Doty based on the investigation of the investigator.

"There was one investigator - a female - the accuser is female and the superintendent with the final word on removal is a female," Bassetti said. "Mr. Doty did not have the benefit of both a male and female

investigator. Where was Mr. Doty's due process? The evidence was presented from one side."

Maureen Cool said she has known Doty for a long time. She read the report and doesn't believe a word of it. He is her good friend and neighbor at the beach, Cool said.

"I just think it needs to be looked into a little bit more," she said. "It will be a great loss for the Highlands County School Board, the school district and the children to lose him."

A total of six people spoke in support of Doty.

A teacher, Shawn Kuhns, introduced himself as, "one of the casualties of Mr. Doty."

Kuhns explained he needed a day off to take his wife to the hospital for a procedure, but Doty wouldn't let him take the time because there was diagnostic testing scheduled. A teacher's union representative said Kuhns should be allowed to take the day off.

According to Kuhns, Doty said everyone needs to be at school that day. Kuhns said Doty told him his wife would have to reschedule her procedure.

"Because of me going to the union, he retaliated," Kuhns said. "From that point on he started looking for ways to have me removed from the school."

Before the Doty supporters spoke, School Board Attorney John McClure said, "This is a period of public comment. It is not a time for public questioning. Make your comments, but do not expect the Board to answer any questions posed to them at this meeting."

"I would admonished the members of the Board to make sure you don't respond to anything because who knows what the future would bring."

# CASES

FROM PAGE 1A

of May 9, 2020, hitting Alexander Nowell in the chest. Nowell died at the hospital, while a second victim, Jed Grant, was shot and survived.

Ford is charged with second degree murder with a firearm and other crimes.

**Ian Dale Jobson** — Jobson's case was continued on Wednesday,

because Hernandez is also Jobson's attorney. Hernandez, however, has scheduled depositions of eight witnesses,

including the detective who investigated the murder Jobson allegedly committed.

Jobson is charged with first degree murder in the December 2017 killing of Anthony Mathison in the Kool Runnings Bar in Avon Park. According to witnesses, Jobson walked up to Mathison's right side, wrapped his left arm around him, pulled a gun with his right hand and shot Mathison in the chest. He let go of his victim and let him fall to the ground.

Jobson then left the bar and drove off in the Nissan in which he had arrived at the bar. Two bar patrons identified Jobson from photo lineups provided by detectives.

**Carlos Gonzalez** — Again, the case was

continued on Monday because Gonzalez' lawyer is also Hernandez.

Gonzalez, who is 64, allegedly stabbed a

houseguest to death in March 2018 after the man got drunk in his home. According to the report on the incident, police arrived at 185 Sarasota St., Lake Placid, and found Martin Zuniga, suffering

from a stab wound to the chest. Gonzalez and a female living at the address told police that Zuniga would not leave the property when ordered to do so.

Zuniga apparently fell off the porch and when Gonzalez tried to get him up, Zuniga punched Gonzalez a few times.

Upset at being punched, Gonzalez allegedly went inside the house and retrieved a butcher knife. He then went back to Zuniga and allegedly stabbed him.

He was originally charged with attempted murder but a death notice shows that Zuniga died on March 29, several days after the stabbing.

Gonzalez is charged with second degree murder.

**Geri German Harvell** — This is a family shooting that took place March 26,

according to police reports. Geri Harvell, Cathy Harvell, and Jason Hernandez all live together at 107 S. Rally Road

in Avon Park. Geri Harvell is accused of shooting Jason Hernandez to death in the home.

Filings show defense attorney Steve Kackley left the case and was replaced by veteran defense lawyer William B. Fletcher of Sebring on Sept. 5.

According to investigators, Cathy Harvell became upset when the young Jason, who was making an 11 p.m. meal in the kitchen, woke the house up. Geri, who was in the bedroom when he heard the other two arguing, put on a bathrobe and pulled a pistol. He went into the kitchen and shot Jason in the chest.

Cathy tried to do chest compressions, but Jason died.

Cathy told Highlands County Sheriff's deputies that Geri had threatened to kill Jason in the past. Cathy said had Geri's gun not jammed after the first shot, Geri would have

shot Jason more times.

**Lance Braden Bleiweiss** — Fletcher, Bleiweiss' attorney, has filed his

intention to depose eight witnesses in the manslaughter slaying of a man during a gathering at the defendant's Sebring home.

Those witnesses include: Mandy Thomas, Seth Abeln, Arianna DeArce, Ryan Adair, Delmar Vohs, Cecilia High, Jeff Fennell, and Brian Robinson. It is known the relationship of the people but several of them may have been present at the time of what may be an accidental shooting.

Neighbors on Cadagua Drive in Sebring called for police after hearing a gunshot the night of May 14, 2020.

Police the next day arrested Lance Braden Bleiweiss after he fled to another house to avoid arrest.

Witnesses at the crime scene house on Cadagua told police that they had smoked marijuana, drank alcohol and played around with a .22 pistol that Bleiweiss said he had stolen from his grandfather.

Unknown to Bleiweiss and his buddies, a bullet was still in the chamber. It went off while it was in Bleiweiss' hands, hitting the unnamed victim in the upper abdomen. Though Bleiweiss ran from the area, the friends drove the victim to AdventHealth Sebring, where he later died.

Police learned that Bleiweiss had run to a relative's house to gather clothes and other items. While there, he repeatedly told his relative, "It was an accident." He also worried aloud that he would end up in prison for life, the witness told deputies.

Police charged him with manslaughter and he's remained in the Highlands County Jail since the event 17 months ago.



BLEIWEISS



JOBSON



HARVELL



GONZALEZ

# FOUNDATION

FROM PAGE 1A

cared most about.

"We wanted him to see them if he opened his eyes for any reason. These photos told the story of who he was, what he did, who we were and what proved to be most important, his LOVE for the University of Florida Gators," she said.

The ladies were told that several nurses came into his room to view the photos. They shared how alone they felt at times working with the hundreds of patients who could not speak and were not allowed visitors to speak for them.

"Our photos, the first-ever hung in that isolation unit, were as one nurse put it 'a refreshing look into who someone is when they can't speak,'" Stites said.

A UF graduate nurse was assigned to Don Serdynski's isolation room. Stites said that night the nurse spent extra time talking to and caring for her dad.

"Because we hung photos of our family and of Florida Gator Football in his isolation room, his nurse, Tim Lanier, a fellow University of Florida graduate,



Tracy Stites and her mother, Jo Ann Serdynski, package the first Who I Am Patient Support Kits. The kits were developed in honor of Don Serdynski, the patriarch of the Serdynski family who died last year of complications from COVID-19.

was able to talk to Dad about us and various Florida Gator Football games as he cared for him. Dad was non-verbal at that time so our photos spoke for him and for us. The night dad passed, Tim held Dad's hand as he passed," Stites said. She added that Lanier shared with her sister Kelly and Jo Ann that he stayed with their dad as he passed because he was not going to let a fellow Florida Gator die alone.

"There are no words to describe how grateful we are my Dad did not die alone. He died with a fellow Florida Gator by his side. It was that night we learned how important it is to have photos and notes in the room to tell your

loved one's story. Pictures can say 1000 words and every family deserves to use them to tell their loved one's story," Stites said.

In the past seven months, Jo Ann Serdynski and Tracy Stites have realized their wish to help families share the lives of a non-verbal loved one with their medical team.

They have formed the Who I Am Foundation, which provides free Who I Am Support Kits to anyone with a loved one admitted to an infectious disease isolation unit. They are also free to families with special needs children and adults admitted into any type of room, as well as families of any patient who is non-verbal.

These kits are a customized wall hanging with pockets for patient information, photos and messages of love.

The Patient Support Kit contains information on national, state and local Highlands County support organizations like Meals on Wheels and social services. Most importantly the 28-by-24-inch wall hanging has 13 clear pockets families can fill with pictures and notes from loved ones. Five of the clear pockets hold Who I Am cards the family can fill out to tell the patient's story when a family member cannot be there. These wall hangings are made with hospital grade plastic so they can be hung inside the patient's room.

They are available for patients at AdventHealth Sebring, all local chambers of commerce and through the website at [whoiamfoundation.com](http://whoiamfoundation.com).

For more information or to request a kit, visit [whoiamfoundation.com](http://whoiamfoundation.com). Donations can be made at the website, or mail a check payable to Jo Ann Serdynski, Who I Am Foundation, P.O. Box 866, Avon Park, FL 33826.

# BOOK

FROM PAGE 1A

they are all my own," she said.

When Don Serdynski got his first Swift, Kelly said she would fly with him to Lakeland and Venice Beach. "I loved to go upside down," she said.

Her dad was a world traveler and, as a member of the Swift Association, he would attend many fly-ins. His favorite place to visit? The Grand Tetons, which is now Kelly's favorite place to visit. "We were fortunate enough this summer to put some of his ashes there."

In fact, the love of The Grand Tetons has led to Kelly volunteering with the Wolf Grizzly Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, where she is a spokesperson and does conferences for their mission. A book by Kelly to be published in spring will be available through the center's gift shop with half of the proceeds going into expanding their grizzly sanctuary.

Kelly's books are all available at [barnesandnobles.com](http://barnesandnobles.com). She has also written "Delilah's Day!," her first book; her second book was "Delilah's Day at Pappy Newt's Farm," a true story about visiting a farm in Pennsylvania. It features my cat Delilah, and her special needs sister Jezzy. My latest is Donald Bryan and his Amazing Swiftly. It is truly a story about my father, with an inspirational message



COURTESY/KELLY SERDYNYSKI

This page taken from Kelly Serdynski's "Donald Bryan and His Amazing Swift Airplane" depicts the things her dad loved - his Swift airplane, citrus and the orange and blue of his beloved University of Florida Gators.



COURTESY/SERDYNYSKI FAMILY

Don Serdynski loved to travel and often did by flying his Swift airplane where he wanted to go.

for young people. All 3 are deeply personal. My book coming in October features Avon Park, Florida. It is very specifically, Lake Lotela. I have so many coming out, that I honestly can't say a number.

My first book was Delilah's Day! It was about my amazing cat Delilah. My second book was Delilah's Day

at Pappy Newt's Farm. This is also a true story about visiting a farm in Pennsylvania; the third is "Donald Bryan and his Amazing Swiftly." All three, she said, are deeply personal.

Her most recent book, "Delilah's Day with her Nana and Gan-Gan," published just last week, features Avon Park, specifically Lake Lotela.