

Centralia officer sued for false arrest in restaurant burglary

By Pat Pratt

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A Mexico, Missouri man is suing Centralia and a police officer alleging he was wrongfully arrested and jailed for four months on charges of burglarizing a restaurant in July 2019, according to a federal lawsuit.

William Garcia filed the lawsuit against the city and Centralia Police officer Landon Enochs in Boone County in April and on Wednesday it was transferred to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri.

A hearing in the matter has not been set.

Garcia said the arrest has caused him to feel unsafe and distrust law enforcement. He has lost time with his loved ones and lost income from employment, as well as the cost of attorney fees to defend himself.

“My reputation was seriously damaged because people saw the story and assumed it was true without knowing how everything really happened,” Garcia said in an interview. “It affected my mentality in a way that I had to tell myself that everything was going to be OK.

“I had to keep calm and trust in my truth and what was real and how that would come out to the light sooner or later, but my biggest fear was to be convicted for something I never did.”

On July 26, Dos Arcos Mexican Restaurant in Centralia was burglarized and a safe containing \$10,000 was allegedly taken, according to an affidavit filed by Enochs seeking charges. One of the suspects apparently had knowledge of the restaurant, as they looked for a key to the office in a location known to employees.

After failing to locate the key, a window in the office was broken and the burglars took the safe, loaded it into a vehicle and fled the scene.

Enochs interviewed owner Jose Garcia, who believed a former employee was involved because they knew where to look for the office key. William Garcia was the only employee he had fired, Jose Garcia would later say in a deposition in the criminal case.

Another employee watched video surveillance from inside the business and told Jose Garcia one of the burglars “looked like Willy,” the deposition reads.

Surveillance video obtained by the Tribune shows two people, neither of whose faces could be clearly identified. They avoid the cameras and their faces are mostly covered by hoods while they are inside the closed restaurant the night of the burglary.

John James, William Garcia’s attorney, wrote in the lawsuit there was no way a positive identification could be made from the video.

“While surveillance footage did record the burglary and two suspects committing it, the truth was that no reasonable person could possibly identify the people captured on film committing the burglary by watching the available video evidence,” James wrote, adding the footage was the only evidence brought against his client in the now dropped criminal case.

John Brooks, who is representing Enochs and the city, declined to comment when reached by telephone Thursday.

In the affidavit seeking charges, Enochs writes that William Garcia is the person seen in surveillance footage committing the crime with an unknown accomplice. He attests Garcia broke into the office and can be seen pushing the safe across the floor to a door leading outside.

“When Garcia could not locate the key, he broke the window to the office and unlocked the door,” Enochs wrote. “Garcia entered the office and took a safe containing \$10,000 in assorted U.S. currency and change.”

William Garcia spoke with officers about the burglary and denied committing the crime.

Enochs wrote he was “clearly not being honest,” evidenced by “numerous physical indications of deceptive behaviors.” The affidavit reads Garcia was nervous when confronted with the video and then asked for an attorney.

Centralia Police Chief Robert Bias, who the lawsuit does not name as a defendant but is named as having approved the affidavit containing the false statements, did not respond to a message left at his office Wednesday seeking comment.

In an interview with the Centralia Fireside Guard following Garcia’s arrest, Bias lauded the work done by the department in arresting Garcia, saying officers conducted 20 to 30 hours of personal interviews and video analysis.

“We had suspected it had to be a former or current employee,” Bias was quoted as telling the Guard. “Employee interviews led us to question Garcia.”

After the interview ended, Garcia was arrested and booked at the Boone County Jail, as police sought and were granted a burglary warrant with a \$10,000 cash-only bond. He was detained from July 27 to late December, more than four months, on the allegedly erroneous charge.

Boone County prosecutors secured a grand jury indictment based on Enochs' investigation. Assistant prosecutor Roger Johnson confirmed a decision was made in December to not prosecute the case.

Johnson said he could not comment beyond that, as the investigation into the burglary is still active and ongoing.

Garcia feared deportation at the time as he was living in the country without legal permission. After being released from the jail, he was taken into custody by federal immigration authorities.

He was released shortly after in January and is now working toward citizenship.

"I felt like I was an easy target," Garcia said. "You have other people that work there who probably were never even questioned."

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