

Banned in Exeter: Police critic unwelcome at church, shops

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EXETER -- A man demanding \$65,000 from the Exeter Police Department to settle a wrongful arrest last spring has been barred from a local church, adding to a long list of local establishments in town where he is not welcome.

Robert Frese, 63, was issued a no-trespassing letter by the United Congregational Church Jan. 6 after the church council unanimously voted to ban him in part for not following building use guidelines and for being “verbally inappropriate” to an office manager. The no-trespass order bans Frese from the entire church property at 21 Front St. and the office building at 12 Center St. It is one of a nearly a dozen no-trespass orders sought against Frese dating to 2007, according to Exeter police.

Frese, who said he attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at the church, denies the church’s claims of inappropriate behavior. He believes the decision to ban him was in retaliation for his ongoing legal dispute with Exeter police.

Frese was arrested on a charge of “criminal defamation of character” this past May after posting online comments accusing Police Chief William Shupe of “covering up for a dirty cop.” The charge was later dropped after the American Civil Liberties Union of New Hampshire got involved to represent Frese and defend his First Amendment rights. ACLU-NH has since filed a lawsuit challenging the criminal defamation statute and sent a demand letter on behalf of Frese to Exeter police requesting \$65,000 for the wrongful arrest.

The attention launched Frese’s case into the national spotlight as he was featured in a Jan. 7 New York Times column by Adam Liptak discussing the legality of criminal libel laws around the country.

Frese noted the Rev. Dr. Emily Heath, the church's pastor, serves as chaplain for the Exeter Police Department. "She's part of the department," he said. "I believe she had some discussion with the police where they asked her to get the no-trespass order."

Heath said Frese's dispute with Exeter police had nothing to do with the church council's decision. She said she waited "too long" to ask the council for the no-trespass order out of her "fears of how this action might be misperceived."

"This is not retaliation against Bob, absolutely not," Heath said. "I do not love the idea of banning someone but it came to the point where the larger population in our community was being too negatively impacted to allow someone to continue their behavior."

According to the police report filed by Sgt. Justin Ranauro, Heath came to the police station Jan. 6 to inquire about getting a no-trespass order against Frese. Heath told police issues with Frese started in the summer, accusing him of being verbally inappropriate with an office manager and obtaining the key code to the church building even though he was not allowed inside unsupervised.

A week before the no-trespass order being issued, the police report notes Frese visited the church's office building and "pressed his nose up against the glass," which made the church's finance director "uncomfortable" with the interaction.

In a letter to Frese, Heath explains why the council attained the no-trespassing order including that he was warned last summer after he attempted to coerce a church staff member to falsely sign-off on court-ordered community service from a previous offense, a claim Frese denies. Heath said after that incident she issued Frese a set of guidelines he would need to follow to keep attending events at the church. Heath wrote Frese was not to know the code for the key box, not to frequent the office property and not be alone in the church at any time.

"Unfortunately, you have failed to abide by these boundaries on multiple occasions," she wrote to Frese.

"(To ask my staff to sign off on community service hours) was totally unethical and it made them uncomfortable," Heath said. "He kept getting the code for the key box, so this wasn't the first time we've had trouble."

She said the decision was not made lightly. In her 17 years as a pastor, Heath said she has only obtained one such order in response to a child custody issue.

Including the most recent order, Frese is banned from 11 public or private establishments and two private residences in Exeter, according to a list obtained from police. One of the bans includes a 2017 conviction for criminal trespassing after Frese was caught rummaging through a private dumpster at the 185-203 Water St. building, which includes Stillwells Riverwalk Ice Cream, Tay & Tay Law Offices and Ruffner Real Estate. The other businesses include LunaChics, Puddle Jumpers, Blue Ribbon Cleaners and all establishments in the Exeter Commons plaza.

LunaChics owner Dana DeNiro obtained a no-trespass order against Frese in 2015. She said prior to barring him from the clothing store, he would often come by to play with her dog. She said he began making himself “too comfortable” and made inappropriate comments towards her customers. She added she and Frese remain friendly.

“He started being fresh acting and would make sexual comments towards customers when they’d try on new clothes; nothing terribly obscene,” DeNiro said. “My store is a women’s boutique. A lot of my customers are younger girls shopping with their moms and it got to the point where I couldn’t have him speaking to a mother and daughter like that.”

Frese was also convicted of stalking by Exeter police in 2014. He was convicted of felony conduct after an accident in March of last year after he hit a construction flagger with his car in Portsmouth in August 2017. He received a 2- to 4-year suspended prison sentence so long as he remained on good behavior for two years.