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## Both sides want to put 'crayon-eater' comment to rest

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Nov 28, 2018 Updated 14 hrs ago

GILMANTON — Selectman Steve McWhinnie won't say anything publicly, hoping his "crayon-eater" comment will be forgotten, according to his family. Likewise, Ron O'Connor says his family just wants to put the story behind them.

Yet it lives on.

During a telephone conversation between McWhinnie and O'Connor about another matter earlier this year, the subject of special needs transportation came up, and McWhinnie said he believes those with special needs should get everything they need, but added that he does not support providing public transportation for a "crayon-eater" to go to Manchester for such support.



O'Connor's wife, Lynn, who has a 20-year-old special needs daughter, took offense at the remark and contacted other town officials, hoping for a reprimand. While McWhinnie attempted an apology, he has maintained that the comment was taken out of context from a private conversation. Town officials have said that, since it was not made at a public meeting, they would be violating McWhinnie's free speech rights with any attempt at a reprimand.

The town's Facebook page has served as a sounding board for continued debate among Gilmanton residents about the remark and whether it merits removing McWhinnie from office.

O'Connor said he has stopped engaging with McWhinnie and his supporters on the matter, limiting his comments to other town issues and support for the Gilford volleyball team's march to the state championship.

However, the Nov. 6 election introduced a new element following an exchange at the polls between McWhinnie and the O'Connors.

Janice McWhinnie, Steve McWhinnie's mother, characterized the encounter as an exploitation of a special needs child. In a letter to the editor of The Laconia Daily Sun, she said the O'Connors' special needs child "was pushed forward in public at the Gilmanton Town Hall at the election center on election day with the words, 'I am not a crayon eater.'"

She said other parents of special needs children were outraged that a child would be exploited for political purposes.

Ron O'Connor disputed that characterization, saying the encounter between the daughter and Steve McWhinnie occurred as the O'Connors were leaving the polling area.

"Allyson wanted to vote for Governor Sununu, since he is an advocate for special needs folks," O'Connor said in an interview. "We went in, did our voting, and talked to another Special Olympics bowling teammate and his grandfather, and some other folks, and were leaving."

He said that, as they were walking out of the voting area, they met McWhinnie and the town moderator at the top of the staircase. Lynn had been introducing Ally to other residents and, when they got to McWhinnie, she said, "Steve, this is my daughter, Allyson, by the way."

They chatted for a few minutes and continued on their way.

About halfway down the stairs, O'Connor said, McWhinnie said, "Nice meeting you, Allyson."

She responded, "Nice meeting you. By the way, we are not crayon-eaters, we are miracles."

McWhinnie reportedly said, "I never said you were; that was portrayed to you in a very wrong way, and we will get to the bottom of it."

Origin of the phrase 'crayon-eaters'

Janice McWhinnie said that crayon-eaters is a term associated with the Marines, and because Steve McWhinnie served in the Marines, he had not intended it as an offensive term.

Crayon-eaters is a “fun” nickname, according to some Marines. An internet search shows they are known as Leathernecks due to the collars they wear when boarding pirate vessels; Devil Dogs based on the Battle of Belleau Wood; Jarhead due to the dress blues they wear (said to resemble a Mason jar); but also as crayon-eaters, Neanderthals, and bullet-proof vests for the Navy.

The latter reportedly came about because, during World War II, the Marine Corps was the only branch of the armed forces that did not require enlistees to be literate. They were stereotyped as being stupid but strong.

Marines came to embrace the term. The website “We Are The Mighty” speaks of joining the infantry: “If you’re a poor crayon-eater who signed an infantry contract, you go to the Infantry Training Battalion. You’ll arrive thinking that becoming a Marine means you’ve been given superhuman abilities only to very quickly find your all-too-human limits.”

O’Connor said the term’s association with the Marines makes it especially offensive.

“The fact that the term crayon-eater was used towards the Marines regularly only reinforces the mentality ... The insinuation is that Marines are not intelligent, so using that at a special needs child is especially derogatory.”

He continued, “Allyson was not exploited for political gain. I am not running for any office whatsoever.”

O’Connor also said he and Lynn had reminded Allyson to be respectful if she did speak to McWhinnie. “She only said a portion of what she wanted to say, and we’re happy she stood up for herself and the rest of the special needs community.”

He concluded by saying, “This has caused enough pain and heartache for our family already. We love the town of Gilmanston and want to focus on the numerous positives this town has. The town can decide what the next chapter has in store in March of 2019.”