

A pet goat, a little girl who loved him, and the county officials who tormented both

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The object of that warrant was Cedar, a pet goat. And the alleged perpetrator was a 9-year-old girl named E.L..... In Shasta County, CA, sheriff's deputies and other county officials emotionally harm a child by taking and killing her pet. They must now answer in federal court.



On July 8, 2022, two sheriff's deputies "[left their jurisdiction in Shasta County, drove over 500 miles at taxpayer expense, and crossed approximately six \(6\) separate county lines.](#)" They were pursuing what they claimed was a "criminal case" involving "property" that was allegedly "stolen" or "embezzled."

According to the [Sacramento Bee](#), the 15-page search warrant and affidavit was very specific about the target Shasta County sheriff's officials were after.

"The location is a single-family residence in a rural residential area," the warrant, signed at 6:33 p.m. on July 8 by Shasta County Superior Court Judge Monique McKee, read. "The property has a tan colored residence with a brown composite style roof."

The document was accompanied by ground-level and aerial photos of the property, along with a street address in Napa and the notation that the subject of the search warrant had been "stolen or embezzled."

Officers were permitted to "utilize breaching equipment to force open doorway(s), entry doors, exit doors, and locked containers in pursuit of their target," the warrant said, then listed areas that might be searched.

"The residence, including all rooms, attics, basements, and other parts therein, the surrounding grounds and any garages, sheds, storage rooms, and outbuildings of any kind..."

The object of that warrant was Cedar, a pet goat. And the alleged perpetrator was a 9-year-old girl named E.L.

Cedar was part of a 4-H program where children raise and then sell the animals for slaughter. But E.L. came to love Cedar and did not want to part with him. Her desires would count for nothing. The deputies would ultimately seize Cedar and

turn him over to the Shasta District Fair, where he was apparently butchered and barbecued, leaving Cedar dead, E.L. traumatized, and 4-H's creed of teaching truth, kindness, and sympathy in tatters.

E.L.'s family is now suing the Fair, the officers involved, and county officials in federal court [for abusing their authority and violating the constitutional rights of the little girl](#).

The Betrayal of Cedar



According to the [complaint](#), E.L. bought the little goat she named Cedar to participate in her local 4-H program. Like other animals raised by other children in the program, Cedar was destined for the Shasta County District Fair, where he would be sold, killed, and eaten. Cedar's buyer was California State Senator Brian Dahle. But when E.L. could not part with the goat, Senator Dahle was gracious and agreed to let the girl keep the goat. Her family even offered to refund any costs involved, including damages incurred by the Fair—which amounted to \$63.14.

Putting aside that this was, at best, a small claims civil matter hardly worth the filing fee, the age of the girl, the object at issue (a pet goat who held no real market value but meant everything to the 9-year-old), the offer to repay any costs, and in a state which has, in practice, [decriminalized most theft-related offenses under Proposition 47](#), the offer of restitution should have ended the matter. Unfortunately, the Fair did not exhibit Senator Dahle's graciousness and rejected it.

If they allowed this girl to change her mind, other kids might not want to have the animals they raised slaughtered, and those that ran the Fair appeared determined to prevent that from happening. Instead, the Office of Sheriff Michael L. Johnson and Superior Court Judge Monique D. McKee, who signed the search warrant, did the bidding of Fair officials to teach the girl a very painful lesson. And to do so, her attorneys argue, sheriff's deputies illegally turned a civil dispute into a criminal one, violating her constitutional rights, traveling hundreds of miles, and spending thousands of taxpayer dollars to kill a pet goat and break a child's heart.

The Betrayal of the Constitution

The sheriff's deputies, Fair officials, and the County are accused of violating 42 U.S.C. Section 1983. Congress enacted Section 1983 as part of the Ku Klux Klan Act of April 20, 1871, largely to protect Southern Blacks from lawless sheriff's deputies and government officials after the conclusion of the Civil War.

It reads, *in relevant part*,

Every person who, under color of any statute... subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States... to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law..."

[E.L.'s lawyers claim](#) the defendants conspired to deprive E.L. of her constitutional rights when they seized her goat because she was the goat's legal owner. They then destroyed the goat—causing his body to be consumed in a barbecue—without allowing E.L. to contest the seizure, as required by law. And they did so despite knowing—or at the very least, *they should have known*—that no crime had occurred, violating the constitution's Fourth Amendment guarantee against unreasonable searches and seizures. Indeed, and to the surprise of no one, no criminal charges have been filed.

Of course, even if E.L. wins, nothing can bring Cedar back. And other animals like Cedar continue to suffer the same fate. While E.L. bonded with Cedar and loved him as if he was "a puppy," society has not evolved to value the lives of animals it deems "livestock," regardless of their sentience, sapience, and capacity for joy and suffering. But society *does* claim to value human children, something that none of the adult defendants appeared concerned about. A court victory cannot undo the emotional harm to E.L., or that these kinds of programs inflict on children generally.

The Betrayal of Oatmeal



In 2016, a young Texas girl also raised an animal she fell in love with — a blind bull she named Oatmeal— for Future Farmers of America, a program similar to 4-H. Her grandmother expressed amazement at their closeness. "I don't know what she says to him, but he responds to her like no other steer I've seen," she said. "When he hears her voice, or even just smells her, you can see his whole body just relax."

“The process to realize that potential took a lot of love and patience,” said her father.

“I’d go to his stall every day and talk to him,” [the girl told a reporter](#). “You can’t be rough with him. He doesn’t respond well to roughness. One day, it just clicked. I started gaining his trust.”

That trust was broken when Oatmeal was “sold and trucked away as 964 pounds of prime beef.” The reporter called it a “tearful goodbye.” It was far worse than that. A public outcry led to offers of sanctuary for Oatmeal, but these were rebuffed by the slaughterhouse.

The Betrayal of Children



4-H portrays programs of raising animals to be sold for slaughter as beneficial and entrepreneurial. If E.L.’s experience proves anything, it is that they destroy what is inherently best in children.

Of course, not all 4-H programs are harmful. As a child, for example, my wife and her brother took 4-H classes related to the care of animals, including a training class for the family dog and “Pocket Pets,” which taught children how to care for hamsters and other small rodents.

Likewise, when they were younger, my wife and I nurtured our own children’s natural desire to care for and be with animals by fostering sick or orphaned kittens for local rescue groups. At the end of their stay with us, these animals were placed into new homes where they were equally loved and cared for. We also rescued and rehabilitated wild animals until they could be released back to their habitats. I cannot imagine my children’s anguish if we handed the animals we cared for to the knife and dinner plate. All the money in the world would not convince my children to make such a trade-off, nor would I think it was something to be celebrated should they ever be capable of making such a calculation.

Even children who do not go through what E.L. went through are victims, too. And while they will not suffer the harm that awaits animals at the slaughterhouse, they suffer, too. Because independent of the tragedy of allowing children to be complicit in the brutality against their animal friends, such programs encourage children to view other living things which they have come to know and love as mere commodities: to be bought, sold, and killed because there is profit in doing so. How does encouraging such behavior in our children contribute to building a better world, as is the 4-H creed?

Instead, it teaches children to suppress their natural empathy in favor of financial gain in a way that desensitizes and diminishes them. And while 4-H programs such as these may leave children's pocketbooks brimming, I cannot imagine that their hearts are not left full of loss and betrayal.

While the lawsuit is pending, Shasta County voters can remove Superior Court Judge Monique McKee from office, as she is running for re-election this year. And although the Sheriff's term does not expire until 2028, he and Fair officials deserve to lose their jobs, too. Because children, animals, and — unlike Judge McKee, Sheriff Johnson, and Fair officials — the adults who take their obligations to look out for them seriously, deserve so much better.

Thankfully, Oatmeal did not end up like Cedar. When the outcry would not subside, Oatmeal was sent to the Agricultural College at Texas A&M, where administrators said there was no intention of killing him. In a subsequent release, college officials said he was moved to a nearby farm where a family cares for him. This outcome remains an aberration.