

Defense: Arsonist fell under spell of ecoterrorism guru

Judge sentences her to nine years

Jeff Barnard
The Associated Press

May 25, 2007

EUGENE, Ore. — As an idealistic girl of 16, Chelsea Gerlach went with her parents' blessing to an Earth First! encampment in Idaho, where she came under the "Svengali-like" spell of an older man who called himself Avalon — after the mythical island where King Arthur went after his death.

According to defense lawyers, the charismatic leader of a Eugene-based cell of the Earth Liberation Front known as The Family exploited the feelings of the teenage girl at a vulnerable age to persuade her to join his campaign of arson intended to strike fear in communities across the West.

U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken took note Friday of the victimization and sentenced Gerlach to nine years in prison, one year less than the prosecution's recommendation. The judge said she still had to pay for her crimes but deserved to have hope of redeeming her life after strong cooperation with investigators after her arrest.

Gerlach, 30, is the third of 10 members of the Eugene-based cell of the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front to be sentenced. All have pleaded guilty to conspiracy and arson charges.

Gerlach was convicted of helping set fires at the Vail, Colo., ski resort, at a meat company and police substation in Eugene, Ore., at a tree farm near Clatskanie, Ore., and at a lumber company office in Monmouth, Ore., and of toppling a high-voltage transmission line tower outside Bend, Ore.

Avalon, whose real name was William Rodgers, advised Gerlach to drop out of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, where she had grown disillusioned with civil disobedience. He tested her loyalty in an aborted attempt to shoot out the lens of a University of Arizona mountaintop telescope. He then drew her and her boyfriend into his biggest job — striking back at the Vail ski resort for expanding into endangered lynx habitat, defense lawyers said.

A cohort quit the job after their truck got stuck in the mud, but Gerlach hung on: driving Rodgers to the top of the mountain, sleeping in the truck while he set the fires and writing the communiqué that denounced the ski resort.

"Had not Chelsea Gerlach met William Rodgers, we would not be seated in this courtroom today, facing the type of sentence she is facing," defense lawyer Craig Weinerman said.

Left unsaid were details of Rodgers' relationship with Gerlach. But defense lawyers denounced him as a sexual predator and a pedophile, citing statements of women who knew him and suggesting that the reason he committed suicide after federal investigators cracked open the case was intense shame over what he had done to Gerlach and others.

Weinerman characterized Rodgers as the "Svengali-like guru" of The Family.

The defense offered details of Rodgers' treatment of Gerlach in a DVD provided to the judge and the prosecution, but at Gerlach's request it was not played in court.

Judge Aiken commended Gerlach for her extraordinary cooperation with authorities, which included persuading fellow defendants to plead guilty.

Gerlach said the decision came after she realized, while in solitary confinement on suicide watch, that violence was no way to save the forests she loved.

The judge scolded Gerlach's parents for letting such a young girl go off on her own for two months.

Aiken found that there was evidence that the police substation fire, the tree farm fire and the high-voltage line toppling were meant as retaliation against government actions or to intimidate the government, qualifying as terrorism for sentencing purposes.

Her voice cracking, Gerlach apologized to the victims of the fires and denounced violence as a means of change.

"It's very clear to me now that if you want to live in a world of peace and equality, you need to embody those qualities in your own heart and actions," Gerlach said. "I am so grateful I have been given this opportunity to reconcile my past."

Weinerman noted that Gerlach had made an emotional plea to her current boyfriend, fellow defendant Darren Thurston, to plead guilty and cooperate with investigators

Thurston wiped away tears as Weinerman described a meeting where Gerlach, surrounded by lawyers and FBI agents in a room, called on Thurston not be a martyr.

"My choice was to be a martyr or have a life," Weinerman read from a transcript of Gerlach's comments. "I want to live.

"In 2001 those in our group brought nothing but pain and misery into our lives. It tore us apart. I've been living underground for 10 years. It feels like a huge weight is gone to be honest with people. You have to tell them everything. I told them everything."

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PETER FREDIN/Associated Press

The Two Elk restaurant on top of Vail Mountain was totally destroyed as shown in this photo in Vail, Colo., on Oct. 23, 1998. Federal investigators have confirmed that arson caused \$12 million dollars damage to structures at the ski area. An environmental group, Earth Liberation Front, has claimed responsibility for the fires.

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For a contrasting perspective on Avalon's character and motives see the text For
Avalon.

For an argument against the use of the term terrorism being applied to the Earth
Liberation Front see the text Searching for Ecoterrorism.

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