

Bitter Reno family battle leads to manhunt, arrests



Roger Hillygus used a fake document to take his mother from a Reno care facility in a battle over the family trust, landing him in jail in Los Angeles.

By Bill Dentzer Las Vegas Review-Journal
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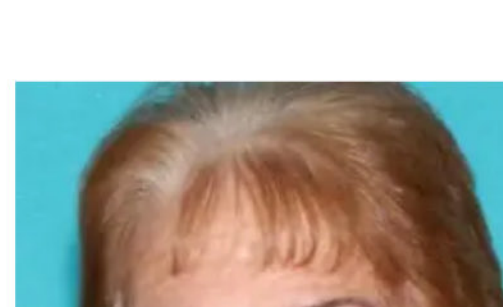
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RENO — Two days before he absconded with his dementia-stricken, 80-year-old mother from an Alzheimer's care facility in northwest Reno, Roger Hillygus eagerly showed a Review-Journal reporter a “jury verdict” that he said would make it all legit.

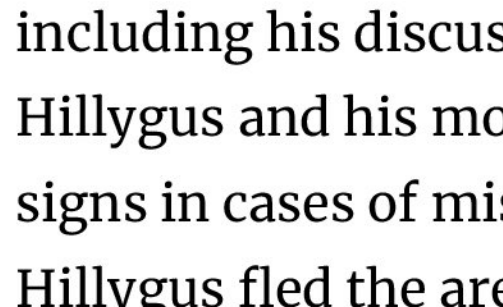
The document was a sham.



Roger Hillygus in a photo released by Reno police department.

By the end of the following week, Hillygus was in custody in California on kidnapping charges; his mother found safe with him. A second man, a former county sheriff, had been charged as an accomplice in the abduction, despite telling Reno police he knew nothing of Hillygus's intentions. His arrest and alleged involvement, as a former top county cop, propelled the case into the national headlines, garnering media attention as far away as New York.

Meanwhile, the “verdict” document, which Hillygus had submitted multiple times in his mother's ongoing guardianship case, held no legal weight. He had obtained it online from a [citizen's rights group](#) in Arizona.



Susan Hillygus in a photo released by Reno police department.

Hillygus took his mother, Susan Hillygus, without a confrontation from the Stone Valley Alzheimer's Special Care Center where she lived on Aug. 8. Two days before, a reporter ran into him by chance, along with the lawyer, Stewart Handte, whose 30-year law enforcement career included a stint as Mineral County sheriff.

Handte, at Hillygus's request, was one of two men who went with Hillygus to the care center. After about an hour there, Hillygus left with his mother, later calling the center to say he was not returning.

As events unfolded over the next week, Handte communicated daily with the reporter, repeatedly recounting that day's events along with day-to-day updates, including his discussions with, and later interrogation by, Reno police, as authorities searched for Hillygus and his mother. A “Silver Alert” — similar to the Amber alerts posted on electronic highway signs in cases of missing or abducted children — was posted in the Reno area on Friday, the day after Hillygus fled the area.

“The FBI's gonna be coming for me soon,” Handte sardonically told the reporter that afternoon, before recounting the previous day's events at the care facility.

On that score, he would prove about half-right.

Long-running custody battle

The one-page document Hillygus thought would cover him, obtained by the Review-Journal from the court file, was his latest legal ploy to win back custody of his mother and control of the family trust that paid for her care. Whether he knew it was worthless is not yet clear, but Hillygus, in that Aug. 6 conversation with the reporter, said it would legitimately restore him as his mother's guardian, a status he had been stripped of in a long-running guardianship dispute with his sister.

A review of the court docket in his mother's custody case shows he had submitted the document multiple times since July, the last time on Aug. 8, the day he fled with her.

The reporter had met Hillygus in passing earlier in June at a Reno law office. Handte had met Hillygus through a mutual acquaintance at the law office a few months prior. Hillygus alleged to the reporter that guardianship of his mother had been effectively stolen from him in legal proceedings and he was fighting to regain it. He said he was a victim of a conspiracy involving lawyers, judges, a private guardian and his sister, who wanted to control the family trust that paid for his mother's care.

Such incidents, where people lose guardianship to unscrupulous third-parties in the courts, do happen, usually when a large estate or trust is involved. The Review-Journal is among the media outlets that [have written about the issue](#). The [paper's reporting](#) prompted the state Legislature, in 2015 and again this year, to tighten licensing procedures for private guardians in the state. Hillygus in fact contacted the Review-Journal reporter who wrote the stories in the spring of 2018, hoping to get coverage for his plight.

A review of Susan Hillygus' five-year-old guardianship case shows her son filed motion after motion accusing the judge, lawyers, court-appointed guardians and his sister of conspiring against him. Multiple lawyers asked to be replaced as his attorney. He filed so many frivolous and defamatory motions in the case that the opposing lawyer sought to have him declared a “vexatious litigant.” After repeatedly failing to heed court orders or follow through on pledges he made, the judge in the case removed him as guardian in December 2015.

More recently, Hillygus, representing himself, filed an action in U.S. District Court alleging all manner of wrongdoing in the guardianship proceedings. His case was thrown out in December, and again on appeal in June.

Plan to take mother to California

Hillygus, on the Tuesday before he took his mother, told the reporter and Handte he would show the care center the document. The Review-Journal later obtained a copy from the guardianship court file. Hillygus said he planned to take her to California, later telling Handte that his mother had a brother living there and that he hoped to establish residency there himself.

Hillygus, 52, who is married and lives in Dayton, said he would undertake the trip despite having fallen off a second-story roof at his contracting job a few weeks earlier, suffering several broken ribs, clavicle and a head injury that knocked him out cold. He had asked Handte to go with him to the care center. A third man would join them, videotaping with his phone if things got out of hand, according to Handte's account to the reporter and police.

Handte, 59, had his doubts about Hillygus's strategy, but he was also sympathetic. As he had told the reporter once in an earlier casual conversation, he had been involved in a similar custody fight with relatives several years earlier when his mother took ill and died.

During a 30-year career in Nevada law enforcement, Handte served in the state Highway Patrol, twice as a deputy in Storey County, and most recently, as chief of two tribal police forces, the Yomba Shoshone Tribe in Austin, and more recently, the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. He was forced out of the Reno-Sparks job in June after just seven months, prior to the Hillygus matter, and is currently trying to win either reinstatement for wrongful dismissal or a severance settlement.

A few days before the abduction, according to Handte, he called Reno Police Chief Jason Soto asking that the department get involved and speak to Hillygus. Soto was out of town in Washington. Reno Police Cmdr. Oliver Miller called Handte back, telling him that Hillygus had been in touch with the police before.

The morning of the abduction, Hillygus met with Reno Police Sgt. Robin Hannafin. Hillygus was told police considered his case a civil matter and would not get involved. Hillygus took Hannafin's card, which he gave to Handte a few hours later, shortly after 2 p.m., when they met outside the care center. He told Handte what Reno police told him about not getting involved. Handte said he asked if police gave any other guidance. Hillygus said no.

The Review-Journal on Monday asked to speak to Cmdr. Miller. The department declined to make him available. Detective Lt. Zack Thew said Miller “is part of the investigative process and has documented his contact in the police report.”

“I can confirm that there was some contact with the police department beforehand, but not the specific details of what that contact was,” Thew said.

The apartment complex in Bellflower, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles, where Roger Hillygus went with his mother, Susan, after taking her from her Reno care facility. (Peter Bennett/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

A quiet departure

Handte met Hillygus and a third man — known to Handte only by his first name, Tracy — outside the care center about 2:15 p.m. They spoke for about 15 minutes outside before Hillygus and Handte entered, according to Handte. Hillygus had mentioned an earlier confrontation at the center on a previous visit, and Handte said that if center staff objected to his presence or stopped him for any reason, they would leave immediately.

Handte said he entered the facility with Hillygus, who initially asked to see another woman. After a few minutes, he came back to the lobby where Handte had remained. The third man remained outside. Handte said he later identified the third man to Reno police when detectives showed him a picture from the body cam footage recorded when Hillygus spoke to police.

Hillygus asked to see his mother and a male attendant took him to her, Handte said. After about 10 minutes, Hillygus returned to the lobby with her. They remained in the lobby for five or 10 minutes when Hillygus asked his mother if she wanted to go for a ride. She said yes, and they exited the building with no objection or intervention by staff, according to Handte. They walked across the parking lot, Susan Hillygus shuffling her feet and holding her son's arm, according to Handte, who walked ahead of them.

Roger Hillygus put his mother in the front seat and fastened her seat belt. He told Handte he was taking her home to Dayton. The third man, Tracy, asked Handte for a ride back to his car, which he had left at a McDonald's in Sun Valley, about 10 miles away.

Some of the details from Handte's account are mentioned in the statement Hillygus's sister wrote in a court filing seeking a protection order after the abduction. Unlike Handte's account, however, her statement says a witness saw Susan Hillygus being “dragged” to her son's car.

Staff at the facility on Friday referred the Review-Journal to upper management regarding questions about the incident. Erin Peacock, a spokeswoman for Stone Valley's parent company, Sunshrine Retirement Living of Bend, Ore., said Monday the company “can't provide any kind of input or answer any questions because we don't want to jeopardize the investigation.”

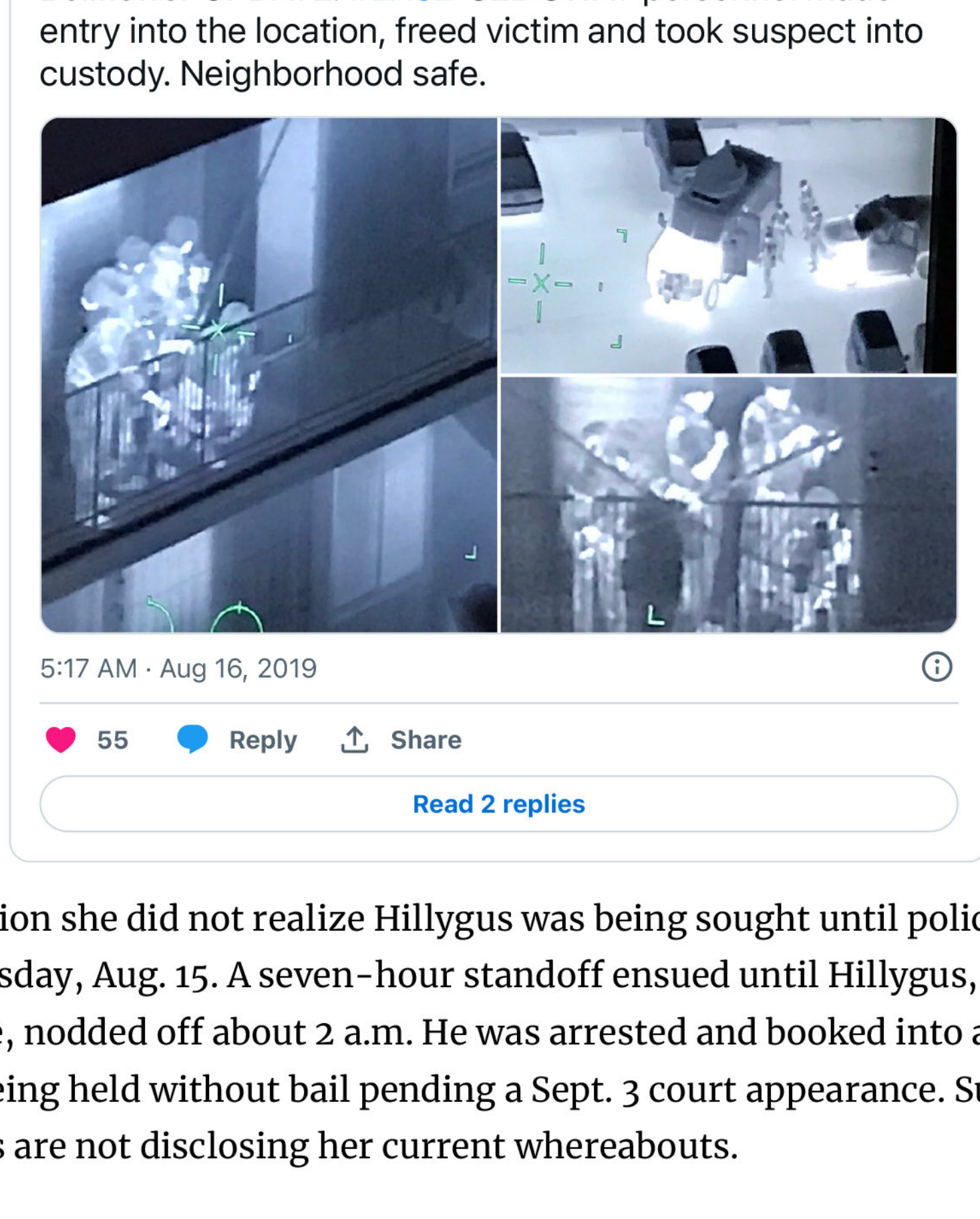
After leaving, Handte said he called Hillygus and told him he needed to give the center the paperwork he had brought along. Later, according to the sister's court filing, Hillygus faxed the sham paperwork to the center, told them he held health care power of attorney for his mother, and was not returning her.

Police get involved

Handte, dreading Tracy off and went home. About 11 p.m., Miller, the Reno police commander, called Handte, asking where Roger Hillygus was.

Handte told Miller he didn't know. He spoke to Reno police several times in the coming days, relaying the same details about the visit he had told the reporter. But Reno police began to doubt his story and challenged his version of events, he said. He had thought Hillygus was taking his mother to Dayton, his home, but recalled Hillygus telling him about his mother's brother in California, and his interest in becoming a California resident.

That brother's apartment in the Los Angeles suburb of Bellflower ultimately is where police found Hillygus and his mother one week after he walked her out of the care center unchallenged. The 85-year-old brother's 80-year-old girlfriend, Wilma DTV, who managed the 16-unit, two-story apartment complex where they lived, [told a Los Angeles TV station](#) that the pair showed up last week and that Roger Hillygus had dutifully cared for his mother during their stay.



Dester told the TV station she did not realize Hillygus was being sought until police knocked on her door around 7 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 15. A seven-hour standoff ensued until Hillygus, according to media reports from the scene, nodded off about 2 a.m. He was arrested and booked into a Los Angeles county jail, where he is still being held without bail pending a Sept. 3 court appearance. Susan Hillygus was unharmed. Authorities are not disclosing her current whereabouts.

Friend interrogated, arrested

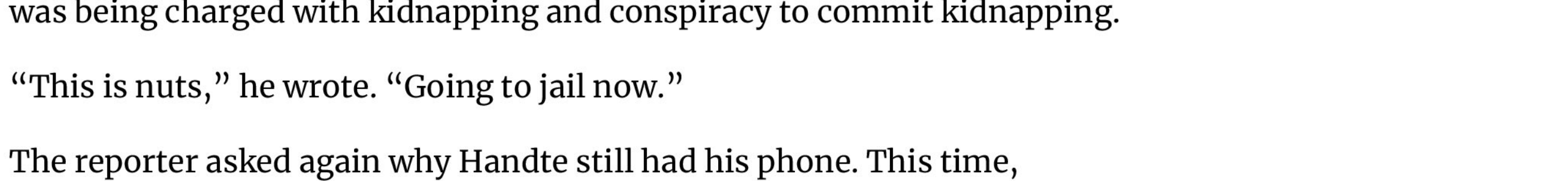
Handte had fared only slightly better. On the Tuesday following the abduction, he was interrogated by Detective Allison Jenkins and other Reno police officers for more than two hours. He surrendered his cellphone to them. He had tried to reach Hillygus by phone and text, but Hillygus wasn't responding.

On Wednesday, the day before Hillygus was found, police arrested Handte outside the Reno law office where he'd gone to discuss his employment complaint. He was charged with second-degree kidnapping and conspiracy, both serious felonies.

Handte, speaking to Reno police by phone Wednesday, was told he was getting his phone back that day. According to witnesses at the law office and to those who spoke to him after his arrest, Handte went out to the law-office parking lot when he was met by a half-dozen officers in tactical gear.

“What the hell, Stew? What the f— are you doing?” one yelled. As he was being handcuffed, another told him to “stop struggling or I'll take you to the f—ing ground.” An officer then entered the law office to get Handte's wallet. When a paralegal asked for the officer's business card, the officer refused.

Thew, the Reno police lieutenant, said Monday the manner of Handte's arrest “was a tactical decision based on circumstances that were presented at the time.”



Following his arrest Wednesday, police let Handte use his previously confiscated phone.

“I'm actually in custody and being detained right now,” he texted in a reply to the reporter shortly after 5 p.m. The reporter texted back to confirm, doubting that someone under arrest would be given use of his cellphone.

“No ... I actually have it if you can believe that,” Handte wrote. Twenty minutes later, he texted that he was being charged with kidnapping and conspiracy to commit kidnapping.

“This is nuts,” he wrote. “Going to jail now.”

The reporter asked again why Handte still had his phone. This time, Handte did not respond.

Arrested hours news

It took about 24 hours for news of Handte's arrest as an alleged accomplice to get picked up by the media, the headlines focusing on his law enforcement background. Handte was being held without bail at the Washoe County jail — housed in the infirmary, apart from the general population. His mugshot joined photos of Hillygus and his mother that accompanied the news stories.

On Thursday, a few hours before Hillygus was found, Handte was released without having to post bail, despite facing Class A and Class B felonies. He has a court appearance scheduled for Aug. 29.

Stewart Handte, a former Mineral County sheriff, charged last week as an accomplice in the abduction of an elderly woman from a Reno Alzheimer's care facility on Aug. 8 by her son. He was photographed Monday in Reno. (Bill Dentzer/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

Following his release, Handte has declined to speak further publicly because of the charges pending against him. He did consent to having his photo taken and said he feared his arrest would end his career in law enforcement. Reno police kept a ceremonial badge from his tribal police days that he had in his wallet, returning it the day after he filed a police report to get it back. They have kept his phone, saying they were still searching it.

On Wednesday, he got a new one.

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