

Mother faces felony charge for repeating threats in her e-mail

By Sally Voth (Daily Staff Writer)

NEW MARKET — A mother of three finds herself charged with a felony for sending an e-mail repeating threats against Shenandoah County Public Schools' southern campus.

Lisa Ritchie's arrest caps a week of multiple bomb threats and the arrest of five teenagers for making those threats. The latest arrests were those of a 15-year-old Quicksburg boy for making a bomb threat at Stonewall Jackson High School, and a 13-year-old Mt. Jackson boy charged with obstruction of justice for his alleged involvement in a rumor that disrupted the southern campus Wednesday, Shenandoah County Sheriff Timothy C. Carter said.

Ritchie, 35, of 522 Smith Creek Road, said she was simply trying to get answers as to why school wasn't canceled after rumors of threats on a MySpace page.

Carter said she "was basically passing on information as though it were true about these threats."

The Virginia Tech shootings have raised anxiety levels across the state and the nation, Carter said.

Ritchie was charged with disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor, and communicating a threat over the Internet, a felony. She was released on an unsecured, \$2,500 bond.

On Thursday, the Sheriff's Office learned of a rumor of a threatening message on a child's My Space page, Carter said. He said the rumor was found to be untrue.

The Sheriff's Office was informed by a media outlet Friday that it had received an e-mail with threats to the southern campus, Carter said. The e-mail was traced to Ritchie.

"I know she sent it to several hundred people," Carter said. "To me, it's unacceptable for a parent to be passing on this type of information as though it's true and factual when they have no information that it's factual or true. Of course, we want parents and the public to contact schools, or law enforcement, or whoever when they have a concern and when they have a question.

"I think there's enough anxiety right now with regard to everything else that's happened in the commonwealth ... that we don't need to be pouring gasoline on the fire."

Friday, Ritchie said a friend alerted her Thursday to the alleged My Space threat. The gist of the threat was that an incident worse than those at Columbine and Virginia Tech would occur at the southern campus on Friday, she said.

"I freaked," Ritchie said. "She freaked. All of our friends freaked."

Ritchie said the superintendent's office told her security at the schools had been increased, and this led her to conclude that there was reason for concern. She kept her three children home.

"My question was, why didn't they cancel school in Shenandoah County today if they even remotely thought there was a problem, or make some kind of public announcement last night?" she asked.

Feeling she wasn't getting anywhere with her questions, Ritchie said she decided to e-mail WHSV in Harrisonburg. Ritchie didn't have a copy of the e-mail she sent, but she says she asked for help in what she should do, and repeated the threat she'd heard, putting quotation marks around it.

Next thing she knew, she was called by the Sheriff's Office.

She denied Carter's claim that she sent the e-mail to hundreds of people.

"He's a liar," Ritchie said. "You talk about floored. All I was trying to do was get an answer why school wasn't canceled today. Any time you state what someone says, you put it in quotes.

"I'm getting a lawyer. This is crazy. I was trying to do good, and it turned into an arrest. I really don't know what to do. I'm scared to death."

With the exception of Frederick County, no other area school systems reported increased problems this past week.

"We became aware last evening of some rumors about some possible fights breaking out at Frederick County Middle School today," public information coordinator Steve Edwards said.

Administrators, Superintendent Patricia Taylor and the Frederick County Sheriff's Office met to discuss the issue, and decided to put an additional resource officer at the school and bring in four student support specialists to help allay children's fears, Edwards said. A letter went home to parents Friday, explaining what was being done and what safety measures were being taken, he said.

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