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Investigations

How the 'queen' of high school rowing left a Virginia nonprofit treading water



By **Joe Stephens** and **Mary Pat Flaherty** October 30, 2013

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Rowing club oblivious, teen athletes get fleeced (4:08)

The Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association says it had no idea the "queen" of regattas was quietly spending tens of thousands of dollars on things such as NFL tickets, vacations and cable TV. The Post's Lee Powell explains how a nonprofit group could get taken. (Lee Powell/The Fold/The Washington Post)

Whether at billion-dollar foundations or neighborhood charities, serious financial wrongdoing is often traced to an unlikely perpetrator — such as Lela W. West of Woodbridge.

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Three years ago, West was one of the nation's most respected leaders in the genteel sport of rowing. West, a grandmother in her late 50s, sat on the board of the national organization that selects Olympic rowers.

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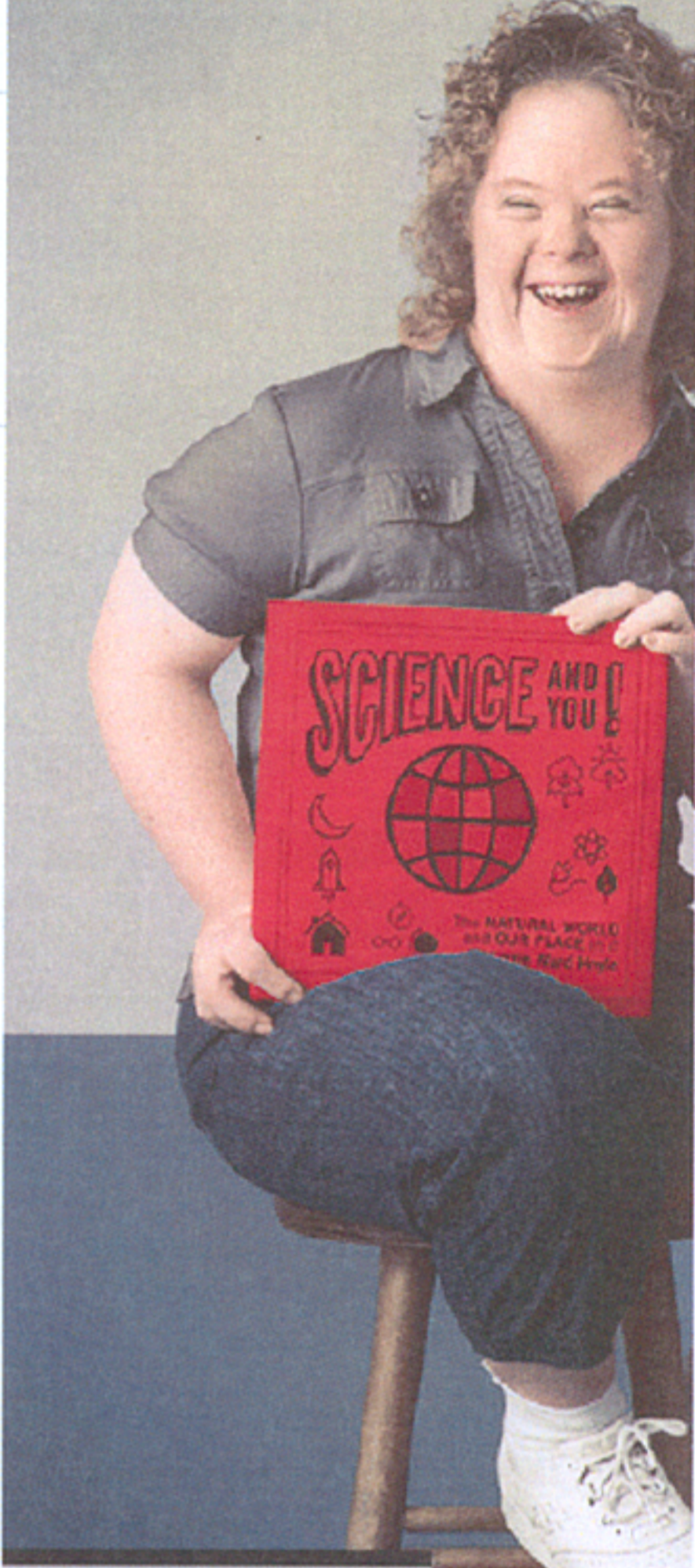
And for more than a decade, she served as the treasurer of the [Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association](#), an Alexandria-based nonprofit group underwritten by fees and donations from thousands of high school athletes in Northern Virginia. She not only balanced the books and wrote out checks but also cheerfully took on the thankless and unpaid task of tallying up cash collected from parking and concessions at more than 100 regattas.

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An Upstate New York newspaper once anointed her the “queen” of high school rowing, noting that “throughout it all, West has done the job gratis, never getting a paycheck

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for the hours and hours of e-mails, phone calls and conversations, pleasant and some not so pleasant, with coaches through the years.”

“It’s full time plus,” West said in the article. “I don’t have time for a paying job.”

Then came the shock. In September 2010, the Virginia association received an e-mail from a sporting-goods company, complaining that a \$38,000 bill had gone unpaid for more than a year. Confronted by other rowing-club officers over brunch, West protested through tears that she had paid the obligation long ago, one person there recalled.

John D. White, the association’s secretary at the time, headed to the organization’s bank in Woodbridge to clear things up. He left three hours later, seething.

Records showed that, over years, thousands of dollars of the association’s money had been spent on clothing, car repairs, flowers, airfare to vacation spots, passes to Disney World — even Redskins season tickets, he said. Some funds allegedly had been spent on cable TV bills.

Thousands more had been inexplicably withdrawn in cash.

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“You don’t want to believe it, and therefore you don’t — until there is unmistakable evidence,” White said. “And then it comes down on you like a ton of bricks.”

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White calculated that there should have been at least \$200,000 in the association's six bank accounts, including money from donors' gifts and student fees. He said bank records showed the balance was less than \$16,000.

John D. White, president of the Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association, says the nonprofit group is no longer trusting of anyone after a longtime bookkeeper embezzled money that has prevented the association from making needed improvements. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

After the embezzlement, the rowing association has limped along with older radios, older boats and aging outboard motors and postponed plans to develop a second race site to supplement its crowded existing site. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

The association will never know how much it actually lost. West had been entrusted with collecting, counting and depositing cash receipts and donations received at all those regattas. White said he has documented nearly a quarter-million dollars in losses, and thinks the total could exceed \$500,000.

Taken together, that represents a big hit for an organization that at the time had a net worth of about \$150,000.

"The anger hasn't gone away," said White, who now is president of the association. "You're depressed, you're surprised, you can't believe it."

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West pleaded guilty to two of 24 counts of embezzlement and in March 2012 was sentenced to 10 years in prison. All but eight days was suspended. A judge ordered West to pay \$150,000 in restitution. (Shortly after the loss was discovered, West had paid the association a lump sum of \$52,000, records show.) The court ordered West to pay the association \$250 a month, White said, meaning full restitution could take longer than 50 years.

"We'll all be dead long before it all gets paid back," White said. "Crime pays."

The association did not announce the embezzlement outside of its board meetings, White said, and the scandal never made the local news or rowing magazines. The organization gave an accounting of the crime in its fiscal 2011 federal disclosure report, but White said that no one ever asked about it.

Even so, White said that some association members heard of the loss through word of mouth and began questioning whether he and other officers could be trusted to handle the nonprofit's finances. Donations dropped from \$9,000 in some past years to \$360 in 2011, he said.

In the aftermath, the association limped along with older radios, older boats and aging outboard motors and postponed plans to develop a second race site to supplement its crowded existing one on the Occoquan Reservoir. It also delayed replacing aging buildings at its race site, which had rotting floors and roof beams that the association considered unsafe.

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“The Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association can never be the same after this tragedy,” Michael Mutter, who was then the group’s president, wrote in a statement to the Prince William County Circuit Court. “It will take years to recover our reputation and status within the rowing community. We will never recover the time lost dealing with the embezzlement aftermath and the distraction from one of our primary purposes, to develop scholastic rowing.”

White said he has an overriding message for other volunteers at grass-roots nonprofits: “Don’t trust anyone. I’ll guarantee you, we’re not trusting now.”

Added Mark R. Peterson, the association’s new treasurer: “This organization runs regattas to benefit kids. They are the ones who were hurt, and that’s too bad.”

Reached at her home, West, now 60, declined to comment, in part because she said she had suffered a nervous breakdown. “It’s just something I don’t want to dredge back up,” West said.

Joe Stephens joined The Washington Post in 1999 and specializes in in-depth enterprise reporting.

Mary Pat Flaherty works on investigative and long-range stories. Her work has won numerous national awards, including the Pulitzer Prize.
