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Woman arrested at rally

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Tisdale
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A Roswell woman was arrested Saturday after she refused to stop recording a political rally in Dawson County with her video camera.

According to the Dawson County Sheriff's Office, 51-year-old Nydia Tisdale has been charged with felony obstruction of an officer and criminal trespass, a misdemeanor.

According to Sheriff Billy Carlisle, Tisdale was advised that the owner of Burt's Pumpkin Farm, where the local Republican Party event was held, wanted her to stop recording and leave.

"The property owner opened his property up for this event to happen on his property," Carlisle said. "He has the right to invite guests on his property. And he also has a right to ask people to leave. And if you refuse to leave, then you're committing the offense of criminal trespass."

Johnny Burt and his wife Kathy, who own the popular tourist attraction on Hwy. 52 in northeastern Dawson, played host to the event, which initially was billed as a meet-and-greet with Gov. Nathan Deal and U.S. Senate candidate David Perdue.

By the weekend, the rally had grown to include District 9 U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, Georgia Attorney General Sam Olens, State School Superintendent hopeful Richard Woods and the heads of the state agriculture, insurance and labor departments, among others.

Sheriff's Capt. Tony Wooten, who was at the event in his official capacity, made the arrest.

"[Organizers] had requested that we have an officer presence there at the event for security and that's what he was there for," Carlisle said.

When Tisdale refused to stop recording and leave the farm, Wooten attempted to escort her off the property, according to the sheriff.

"That's when she kicked him in the shin and elbowed him in the mouth," Carlisle said. "From that point on, she was charged with criminal trespass and felony obstruction."

Tisdale maintains she had told Kathy Burt when she got to the farm of her intention to record the speakers. The Burts deny that contention.

"What she did is she came in and told my wife and daughter that she was there with the governor to record him, so we thought she was part of their party," Johnny Burt said Tuesday. "She misled my daughter and my wife.

"She promptly sat down on the front row on the end where she would be right in their face and was making everybody uncomfortable."

According to Johnny Burt, he instructed Wooten to get Tisdale to stop.

"I told him, 'Have her cut the recorder off.' He went up to her and she refused," Burt said. "Then I told him to get her out. He asked to her leave politely, very politely, and she refused to leave. So he had no choice but to forcefully remove her.

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"She tried to hit Tony with the camera and he had to remove the camera from her hand and she slapped him in the face and I saw that. Tony only done what he was asked to do by the property owner and that was me."

Had she cooperated with the request to stop recording, Burt said she could have stayed. "If she had in the least cooperated, just cut her camera off, and sat there through the meeting and asked all the questions she wanted to at the end, it would have perfectly fine. But she misrepresented herself to start with," he said.

Tisdale was taken to the Dawson County Detention Center. She was released around midnight after posting a \$6,200 bond, according to jail records.

Tisdale, who describes herself as a "citizen journalist," contends she did nothing wrong and plans to hire an attorney to fight the charges.

"I wasn't bothering anybody. I wasn't talking. I wasn't asking questions. I wasn't heckling. I wasn't disruptive. I was sitting there quietly with my camera on record and that was it, and no one had objected at all to my camera," she said.

"I have to defend myself in court. The second [charge] is obstruction of officer, and I'm told that is a felony. I need to get these charges dropped or resolved or settled or whatever."

Clint Bearden, former chairman of the Dawson County Republican Party, worked with several candidates to organize the event and secure the location.

He said the claim that no one had objected to her filming the speakers is not true. Representatives from Democratic candidate camps had been also informed they could not record the event and "had actually left the premises as a result."

"Unfortunately, [Tisdale] wasn't noticed until the event was ongoing," Bearden said. "The request was then extended to her, the same as it was to the folks beforehand."

Bearden called the incident unfortunate.

"I don't think anybody would have liked to have seen that happen that way, but the reality is you have a request by a private property owner that had been made earlier in the day, and other folks with video cameras had complied with that request," he said.

Tisdale said Tuesday she may not have given Wooten her full attention when he initially asked her to quit recording.

"My attention was on my job, my craft, my work," she said. "... This was the third interruption I had while I was trying to record a campaign event ... interfering with what I'm trying to do, which is capture candidates speaking on the campaign trail, to put it online so that other people can hear their message and hear what their thoughts are on the issues and to encourage voters to go out and vote and turn out at the polls on election day. That's my purpose."

Tisdale said she protested when Wooten, who she contends would not identify himself, attempted to escort away from the area where the candidates were speaking.

"Before I knew it, my arm was being forced behind my back and I was being shoved and pushed outside the tent and past the audience and up an incline. I protested. I didn't know who he was," she said.

Wooten was wearing a department-issued black polo shirt with the Dawson County Sheriff's logo on the front left side. He was also wearing a badge and his firearm was visible, according to Carlisle.

"He followed protocol. He did what he was supposed to do," Carlisle said.

Linda Clary Umberger, chair of the local Republican Party, issued a personal statement on the incident. Her comments, she said, do not reflect a position of the local party.

"Being a Republican woman and the chair of the Dawson County GOP, I am still troubled by the removal of a woman who was videoing speakers at a political event this past Saturday at Burt's Pumpkin Farm in north Georgia," she said. "This meeting was advertised as open to the public and there were no announcements or signs requesting recording devices to be put away."

The local party was not involved in organizing the event.

"Though I have a respect for private property rights, I also respect the First Amendment rights of an individual, which should be mutually respected," Umberger said. "I believe this was an unfortunate situation that could have been avoided if cooler heads had prevailed."

Olens, the state's attorney general, was the only official present to address the incident publically



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that day.

"If we stand for anything as a party, what are we afraid of having a lady with a camera filming us? What are we saying here that shouldn't be on film? What message are we sending that because it's private property they shouldn't be filming it?" he told the crowd.

In 2012, Olens filed a lawsuit against the city of Cumming after Tisdale was told by Mayor H. Ford Gravitt that she could not record the council's April 17 meeting.

Johnny Burt said he was disturbed to find out Olens had filed the lawsuit on Tisdale's behalf.

"Sam Olens, our attorney general, came to me and wanted me to get the charges dropped," Burt said. "He came and sat down beside me after the incident happened. He said if I was in your shoes, that's what I'd do.

"[Tisdale] was here to make trouble and that's exactly what she did. It's very embarrassing to me and my family, because we work hard to get this farm the way it is."

It was announced Tuesday that a senior Superior Court judge had ruled in favor of Olens in the open meetings dispute involving Gravitt. He ordered Cumming and mayor to pay \$12,000 in penalties plus attorney fees.



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