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Woman who had 'infatuation' with Columbine tragedy found dead at Echo Lake

By Corinne Westeman ; Deb Hurley Brobst and Deborah Swearingen
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Schools in Jefferson County – and across the state – have returned to business as usual after last week’s credible threat that caused shelter-in-place protocols on April 16 and schools to be closed on April 17.



Sara Hertwig

Clear Creek Sheriff's vehicles were stationed at Echo Lake after the body of Sol Pais was discovered on Wednesday morning.

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Sol Pais, 18, of Florida arrived in Denver on April 15 and was sought by law enforcement the next two days for credible but non-specific threats against Denver-area schools, including an “infatuation” with Columbine High School. With the 20th anniversary of the Columbine tragedy on Saturday, officials were extra-vigilant in thwarting any possible attacks to schools.

However, investigators found her body around 10 a.m. April 17 along a trail in the Echo Lake area near the base of Mount Evans. According to Clear Creek Undersheriff Bruce Snelling, Pais died late in the afternoon of April 15. The Clear Creek Coroner’s Office confirmed the timeline of Pais’ death on Monday morning.

Pais purchased a shotgun at a Littleton-area gun store shortly after arriving in Denver and then had a ride-share driver drop her off near the Echo Lake campground around 2 p.m. Monday. Snelling said that,

despite the remoteness of the area and Pais' lack of preparedness for alpine conditions, the situation didn't raise any red flags for the driver.

"She indicated to (the driver) that she had never seen snow before," he said. "... She appeared to be normal, having normal conversation. It appears she came up to the area to look around and see snow."

Pais walked about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile along a trail and then approximately 100 yards off-trail and took her own life with the shotgun she'd purchased, Snelling said.

This situation, unfortunately, is not uncommon in Clear Creek County. Snelling said the Sheriff's Office probably addresses five to 10 calls a year of people committing suicide in the mountains because of the tranquil setting.

Snelling said that he didn't have any problems with the precautions the school districts took in light of Pais' presence in Denver, saying that a lot of information was being gathered at the time, and it was still a dynamic situation.

"Everybody was making sure that the kids and the community were staying safe," he continued. "They're close calls; they're tough calls to make."

Snelling said that he's seen portions of Pais' writings, which were part of the reason the Federal Bureau of Investigation believed her to be a credible threat to the community. He said there was a definite link between Pais and the Columbine tragedy.

Alpine Rescue Team joined the Clear Creek Sheriff's Office during April 17 search at Echo Lake.

"She found a peaceful location to end her journey, and my wish is that she could've sought or received some kind of help so it didn't end that way," Snelling said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with her family."

Timeline

According to Special Agent in Charge Dean Phillips of the FBI's Denver office, his team received information from its Miami counterpart early on April 16 about Pais, whom investigators believed was a potential threat to the local community. Pais, who traveled to

the Denver metro area from Miami on Monday, had made some “concerning comments” about the April 20, 1999, Columbine High School tragedy, Phillips said.

“She has expressed an infatuation with Columbine ... the shooting there that happened, tragically, 20 years ago. And because of that, we were concerned,” Phillips had said during an April 16 press conference.

Additionally, Pais purchased three one-way tickets to Denver, another red flag for law enforcement.

Pais reportedly departed Denver International Airport on April 15 and used a ride-hailing service to get to Colorado Gun Broker, a gun store in South Jeffco’s Bowles Marketplace less than 2 miles from Columbine High School, where she purchased a pump-action shotgun and ammunition.

Pais went through a background check and was given clearance by both the National Instant Criminal Background Check System and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.

“We had no reason to suspect she was a threat to either herself or anyone else,” gun store owner Josh Rayburn wrote on the store’s Facebook page. “We are very sorry to hear of the outcome in this situation. It is never good when someone loses their life.”

Following the gun purchase, Phillips said Pais caught a ride up to the Mount Evans area, where she was last seen. All indication is that Pais acted independently, but the investigation is ongoing, he said.

Around 9 a.m. April 17, Clear Creek Sheriff Rick Albers said, a tactical team was called to Echo Lake Lodge, where law enforcement officers checked the outbuildings and other parts of the area. In the search, they found relatively fresh foot tracks and followed them to Pais’ body.

The area was closed during the investigation to determine that there was no further criminal activity, but Albers confirmed that his deputies had concluded their on-scene investigation by mid-afternoon that day.

Both Phillips and Albers said the community played a vital role in locating Pais as the FBI received a significant number of tips, and her photo was widely shared among the public.

"It's a big team that we have in Clear Creek County," Albers said, referring to law enforcement and residents. "... It was a joint effort, a community effort."

Albers said he was proud of his deputies' professionalism and focus during the investigation, and Phillips said that law enforcement across the metro area worked tirelessly for 36 hours.

"Everybody this week has heightened their awareness, especially with the anniversary of Columbine," Albers said. "... The threat is gone. It's sad that we had to lose a life, but our kids can go back to school and feel safe, and the parents don't have to worry about their kids."

When Phillips was asked whether closing schools on April 17 was an overreach, he responded: "As a parent, I would say 'Thank you' to the school system for protecting my child."

He also said that he couldn't comment on Pais' mental health state or whether she had been previously evaluated by mental health professionals. "That will become more clear as the investigation continues," Phillips said.



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By Deborah Swearingen

Tuesday, August 20, 2019 at 2:27 pm

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