

= Shawn Lonsdale =

Shawn Lonsdale (1969 ? February 16 , 2008) was a videographer and prominent critic of the Church of Scientology . He resided in Clearwater , Florida , and regularly videotaped members of Scientology coming and going from church activities in Clearwater . Lonsdale had initially intended to do a photography project on homeless people in Clearwater , but after an experience at a City Council meeting , he began to research Scientology . Lonsdale got into an argument with a Scientologist at the City Council meeting , and the Scientologist followed him home and the next day Lonsdale observed a van waiting for two hours outside his home . After researching the Church of Scientology on critical websites , he decided to expose information about the organization . He established a website , and filmed video footage of Scientologists going about activities in Clearwater , and aired edited footage on a local Public @-@ access television cable TV station . After getting into a physical altercation with a Scientologist while filming , the Scientologist was arrested and charged with misdemeanor battery , but was later released and the charges were dropped .

The Church of Scientology hired private investigators and discovered a criminal record on Lonsdale , and this was subsequently publicized by a Scientologist on fliers and on a website . Lonsdale was subpoenaed by the Church of Scientology in 2006 , and they accused him of being affiliated with the Lisa McPherson Trust , a group critical of Scientology which was restricted in where it could protest in Clearwater . In 2007 , Lonsdale appeared on the BBC Panorama program Scientology and Me and was interviewed by journalist John Sweeney . Later in the program , Sweeney lost his temper and shouted at a Scientology representative when he was accused of giving Lonsdale a " soft interview " . Lonsdale died suddenly on February 16 , 2008 , and a Clearwater police spokeswoman stated that the death appears to be due to suicide .

= = Critic of Scientology = =

Lonsdale , never a Scientologist himself , became critical of the Church of Scientology in mid @-@ 2006 , and often stood outside in downtown Clearwater near Scientology 's spiritual headquarters wearing a sandwich board sign that read " Cult Watch " . Lonsdale became interested in Scientology after getting into a fight with a Scientologist over redevelopment issues while at a City Council meeting . After the Scientologist followed Lonsdale 's car home and Lonsdale noticed a van parked in front of his home for two hours the following day , he began to research the background of Scientology on anti @-@ Scientology sites on the Internet and in the library . He taped hours of footage of Scientology staffers , security guards , and verbal confrontations with Scientologists , and edited clips into a pseudo @-@ documentary which aired on local public @-@ access television . Lonsdale dropped fliers outside downtown businesses and picked through trash from a Scientology @-@ owned business and posted documents online . He parked outside a Scientology cafeteria with posters in his car window which stated that key Scientology texts were available for free on the Internet : " OT I @-@ VIII for free at xenu.net. "

On July 8 , 2006 , Lonsdale got into a physical altercation with a Scientologist while filming the Church of Scientology in Clearwater . A spokeswoman for the Church of Scientology told Bay News 9 that Lonsdale had been harassing their staff members , and that the fight was not related to the church . Lonsdale stated " Basically , I 'm filming a pseudo @-@ documentary for one of our free @-@ access Pinellas web channels , " and said that while filming a Scientologist came out of a coffee shop and yelled that Lonsdale was a religious bigot . Lonsdale stated " I picked up the camera again and started filming him ... He went right for my face and my head , backed me up into a pole to which I had no other choice but to defend myself . " The Scientologist was arrested by Clearwater police and charged with battery , but the State Attorney 's Office of Florida decided not to pursue charges . After the incident the Clearwater police Deputy Chief viewed a videotape of the altercation , and concluded that Lonsdale was the victim and that his police officers made the right decision in arresting the Scientologist . After viewing the videotape , the Assistant State Attorney stated " it is just not going to be a prosecutable case , " and said that the video shows " pretty much

mutual aggression " between Lonsdale and the Scientologist . The Assistant State Attorney stated that the video showed aggression on both sides , and that Lonsdale 's criticism of Scientology on the internet made the case " unprosecutable " . Lonsdale 's attorney Luke Lirot stated " It is another example of the State Attorney 's Office 's historical reluctance to tangle with Scientology . " Scientology spokeswoman Pat Harney said that church members had been told to avoid Lonsdale , and told the St. Petersburg Times that Scientologists had complained to police that they felt Lonsdale was stalking them . The police did not charge Lonsdale , stating that he had the right to take photos and video in public places .

= = = Response by Church of Scientology = = =

The Church of Scientology responded to Lonsdale 's activities by hiring a private investigator to investigate him . The private investigator discovered that Lonsdale had two misdemeanor convictions for lewd and lascivious conduct dating back to 1999 and 2000 , both related to public sex with men . In mid @-@ July 2006 , Posters with a mug shot of Lonsdale appeared in store windows warning that he had been arrested for sex crimes and was dangerous . The Church of Scientology told Bay News 9 that it did not hand out the fliers , but that they came from an organization calling the " Cleveland Street Safety League " . The St. Petersburg Times reported that the man behind the " Cleveland Street Safety League " is " a longtime Scientologist known for confronting critics " . The Scientologist behind the Cleveland Street Safety League created a website about Lonsdale and posted his arrest record and comments Lonsdale had made on a swinger site , and also called Lonsdale 's family in New England claiming that Lonsdale needed mental help .

Lonsdale 's employer and landlord received phone calls from Scientology representatives who claimed that he was a religious bigot and dangerous . Lonsdale was subpoenaed by the Church of Scientology for a deposition in the fall of 2006 , and the Church claimed that he belonged to an anti @-@ Scientology group which had previously been barred from protesting in certain areas in downtown Clearwater , the Lisa McPherson Trust . Luke Lirot , the lawyer who defended Lonsdale in the matter , told the St. Petersburg Times : " I found him to be quite affable and truly a very intelligent man ... I certainly hope that a very thorough investigation is conducted . " In his deposition , Lonsdale stated he was unemployed and began to educate himself about Scientology while working on a photography project on homeless people in Clearwater . After reading more about Scientology , he decided to shed light on the organization and irritate Scientologists . Of the claims Scientology made that Lonsdale was affiliated with the Lisa McPherson Trust , Lirot commented : " It was obvious to everybody he had nothing to do with the trust , and the trust had been disbanded and dissolved many years prior ... They just wanted to try to come up with a way to preclude him from exercising his right to picket in downtown Clearwater , and they were unsuccessful in doing that . "

= = Scientology and Me = =

In May 2007 , Lonsdale appeared on BBC 's Panorama program in a piece titled " Scientology and Me " , and was interviewed about his experiences as a critic of Scientology by journalist John Sweeney . When Sweeney asked Lonsdale why the Church of Scientology was publicizing derogatory things about him , Lonsdale replied : " They are trying to embarrass me . They try to paint you as crazy , so that no one will listen to you . " During their interview , Tommy Davis arrived , opened a folder , and began to read out loud Lonsdale 's criminal record . Later in the program , Sweeney was accused by Scientologist Tommy Davis of giving " convicted sexual pervert Shawn Lonsdale " a " soft interview " . Sweeney yelled at Davis and lost his temper , with both men shouting at each other back and forth . A Scientology @-@ produced video of the incident was uploaded to YouTube and viewed over 856 @,@ 000 times .

= = Death = =

In 2007 , Lonsdale let his Scientology critique website lapse , and posted less frequently on his blogs and anti @-@ Scientology message boards and chat forums . Spokeswoman Pat Harney stated that the Church had not heard from Lonsdale for months before his death . Former Scientologist Randy Payne told the St. Petersburg Times that Lonsdale " found it impossible " to make a living while spending the majority of his time as a critic of Scientology . Payne stated that in December 2007 Lonsdale had found steady work , and had planned to go back to school in order to get a private investigator 's license .

Clearwater police discovered Lonsdale 's body after they were alerted by neighbors and found a garden hose connecting the exhaust pipe of Lonsdale 's car with one of the windows of his home . Clearwater police spokeswoman Elizabeth Daly @-@ Watts stated that there were no signs of foul play involved , and that police found what they believed to be a suicide note . Daly @-@ Watts said that " It does appear to be a suicide . " Police officially ruled Lonsdale 's death as suicide on May 2 , 2008 .

Scientology spokeswoman Pat Harney called Lonsdale 's apparent suicide " awful " and stated " It 's just unfortunate anybody feels they have to go to that length ... I wouldn 't wish that on anybody . " Jerald Rowlett , a fellow Scientology critic and friend from Michigan , told The Tampa Tribune : " In many ways Shawn was a hero to me ... He had a hard life and a history he knew Scientology would use to hurt him . And yet he still felt strongly enough to try to inform the public about the actions of Scientology . " On March 1 , 2008 , John Sweeney remembered Lonsdale and spoke about him on the BBC Radio 4 program , From Our Own Correspondent . Sweeney stated : " Clearwater got that little bit more creepy recently , with the death - the police are treating it as suicide - of Shawn . When alive a Scientology spokesman said of him : ' He has no redeeming value to anyone , anywhere . ' Well , he was a bit of a hero to me ... I for one mourn the loss - of a brave and singular American " .