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'Educated' should be read with grain of salt, says family's attorney

By Necia P. Seamons The Preston Citizen Feb 23, 2018

Like most parents, Val and LaRee Westover love their daughter, but unlike most parents, today they do that from afar, said their attorney, Blake Atkin of Clifton. LaRee Westover referred a call from the Citizen regarding the publication of their daughter Tara Westover's book, "Educated," to Atkin.

The book is Tara's memoir. Her parents raised their family in what Tara described as an extremist mindset, but what they felt was self-sufficiency, Atkin said.

The Westovers chose to teach their children at home, but at 17, Tara decided to take her education into her own hands. Following an older brother's example, she obtained the books she needed to study to take the ACT test. She scored so high she was not only accepted into Brigham Young University, but earned a scholarship to do so, Atkin said.

Tara graduated magna cum laude from Brigham Young University in 2008. She then went on to earn a master's in philosophy from Trinity College, Cambridge University, and spent a year as a visiting fellow at Harvard University.

Today she lives in England and has since earned a Ph.D. in history.

The book describes Tara's journey from an upbringing in which Tara felt her parents' survivalist ideals did not prepare her for her life.

She was born in 1986, but unlike most American residents, she did not have a birth certificate. She writes that Val's survivalist ideals and distrust of the government plus LaRee's knowledge of herbs and midwifery meant the younger children were delivered at home, and if they were injured or ill, LaRee healed them.

Years ago, when Val was severely burned in an explosion, LaRee supervised his recovery at home, Tara wrote.

"Tara's parents are disappointed Tara would write a book that maligns them, their religion, their country, and homeschooling," he said.

Although “there’s a little germ of truth,” in “Educated,” the book falsely portrays the Westover family, Atkin said.

“They are conservative, patriotic people. Tara says her father is a (Mormon) fundamentalist, which infers that he believes in polygamy. That’s certainly not the truth. She actually says her father has schizophrenia and that her mother had a severe brain injury that was never cared for, so she has lost her motor skills. Anyone who knows her knows that is not true,” Atkin said.

“The Westovers have hundreds of people that rely on their business, so they’ve instructed me to not let the allegations go unanswered,” Atkin said.

Butterfly Express, a 22-year-old company, began as a cottage industry in which LaRee’s knowledge of herbs and essential oils offered people “affordable and natural alternative resources for their families,” states their website.

Today, Butterfly Express is a family business with multiple facilities, 30 employees and an automated assembly line offering a wide variety of essential oils, education and related personal products including tinctures, minerals, diffusers and jewelry.

In an NPR interview Feb. 20, Tara noted that when she did reach BYU, she felt fearful and uneducated.

“One of my first lectures, I raised my hand and asked what the Holocaust was because I had never heard of it,” she said on NPR.

“And after a year or two of being in this environment and learning about all of these things — the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement ... the difference between North and South Korea — the world started to feel very big. And that’s, I think, when I began to wonder if moving back (with my family) ... was really what I wanted,” she said on NPR.

Atkin disagrees with Tara’s characterization of the family’s educational efforts.

“The premise is that they started teaching the older kids, but by the time they got to her they neglected her schooling,” Atkin said.

Tara is one of seven children, three of whom have gone on to earn their a Ph.D.: Tara, Tyler and Richard, said Atkin.

“That’s 42 percent of their children. I think you’d be hard-pressed to find a public school with those statistics,” he said.

“We used to think that education was to teach you how to read, think and plan what you wanted to do. If that were still the definition of education, then Val and LaRee Westover’s homeschooling was successful,” Atkin said.

Although Atkin said he feels the book is libelous, he said he has not been instructed to take legal action.

"The Westovers love their daughter, and they don't want to hurt her," he said.

But Tara writes in her book that when she went to them about a brother's abusive behavior, she didn't get the help she needed, which lead to estrangement from her family.

During a recent appearance on "CBS This Morning" she explained:

"When I confronted my parents with that, they decided to try and convince me that I was insane, and I couldn't trust my own memories, and ultimately that would lead to estrangement from my family. At first that was their choice; they ostracized me for speaking up against my brother. And then eventually, it took me a lot of years, but then that was also my choice," she said.

Atkin said Tara's parents are troubled by those claims.

"They thought they were dealing with situation the best they could with what they knew," Atkin said.

Tara said on the CBS show that her parents continually denied things that were happening, such as the incident with her brother.

"One of the reasons I wrote the book is because of the gaslighting I experienced from my parents," she said. "I think the tragedy here isn't that bad people do bad things. I think the tragedy is what good people do to keep secrets."

Atkin said he has known the Westovers for 15 years and defends their goodness.

"My hope is that people will read the book with a little grain of salt," Atkin said.

He acknowledges that she is in contact with some members of the family and not others.

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