

I couldn't argue with the Oregon superintendents for bashing Dale Bernards. They figured the SOB should rot in hell for firing one of their peers for having a brain tumor and not being able to work anymore.

Last November, Bernards fired certified superintendent Walter Mattison from Widgi Creek GC in Bend, Ore. Never mind that Mattison worked at Widgi Creek since its construction 10 years ago. Never mind that Mattison gave his all every day. It was a business decision by Bernards, the general partner of Widgi Creek.

The firing happened about six weeks before the popular Mattison died. What made Oregon superintendents even more furious was that Bernards phoned Mattison's wife, Nancy, to tell her of the bad news while Mattison was attending a Northwest Turfgrass Association meeting. Rumors circulated that Bernards didn't have the guts to tell Mattison in person.

When I heard the story, I was outraged — and I had never met Mattison. I couldn't believe that someone could be so cold. One of Mattison's colleagues described Bernards as a man who's strictly business and insensitive.

I couldn't wait to get Bernards on the phone to ask him about his heartless decision. I called him at work, at home and on his cell phone, but I couldn't reach him for a week. When I finally did contact him, he told me he was busy and would get back to me that day, but he never did. I figured he knew I was on to him for what he did to Mattison and was dodging my calls.

I was wrong. I called Bernards the next day, and he was more than eager to talk about what happened. I asked him if he knew that some Oregon superintendents were incensed at him for firing Mattison. He did, but he wanted me to hear the entire story.

Bernards said he did everything he could for Mattison. While Widgi Creek doesn't offer disability plans to employees, Bernards continued to pay Mattison his regular salary — even though he said Mattison hadn't work for six months. He also said he told Mattison the time would come when the financially strapped course wouldn't be able to pay him. Bernards said Mattison understood.

The situation came to a head in November. Bernards says he had to stop paying Mattison or

Anger and Outrage Is All for Naught

BY LARRY AYLWARD



THERE'S A MESSAGE

TO THIS STORY

THAT'S EASY

TO GRASP

lay off three maintenance workers. "It was upsetting to me," Bernards says, noting that the cash-starved course lost about \$200,000 last year.

"We did above and beyond what we could do."

Perhaps Bernards did. While he couldn't pay Mattison's salary, he didn't take away his health insurance. He also allowed Oregon superintendents to use Widgi Creek for a fundraiser, which took place in November and raised more than \$20,000 for the Mattison family. Bernards vows to have the fundraiser every year.

I was satisfied with Bernards' reason for having to stop paying Mattison. Still, I wanted to know why he couldn't have told Mattison of his decision face to face instead of calling his wife.

Bernards says he didn't want to meet with Mattison at that time because the superintendent was in bad shape. He was in a wheelchair, his speech was slurred and his spirits were down.

"I didn't want to go to Walter in that situation," Bernards says. "I thought [the news] would put him over the edge."

I had heard both sides of the story, but I still wanted to hear it from somebody in the middle. So I contacted Widgi Creek's new superintendent, Jerry Palmerton, to get his take. Palmerton was Mattison's assistant for three years and became superintendent when Mattison couldn't work. It was a difficult move for him because Mattison was his mentor and friend.

Palmerton had heard other superintendents badmouth Bernards on behalf of Mattison. "What they're saying is the furthest thing from the truth," Palmerton says. "[Mattison] wasn't fired. Bernards did what he could for him."

There's a message to this story that's easy to grasp. In the meantime, it's time to get off Bernards' back and let Mattison rest in peace.

Larry Aylward, editor of *Golfdom*, can be reached at 440-891-2770 or laylward@advanstar.com.