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Matron Saint

Jeanette Finicum has been pushed to the front of the patriot movement.

By Todd Macfarlane

How did an unlikely city girl end up marrying a freedom-loving cowboy, and then suddenly—22 years later—end up getting thrust onto the front lines of the patriot movement?

Like others on the front lines, Jeanette Finicum has had more than her fair share of curve balls in the past few years. While others have experienced the brunt of the heavy-handed animosity of the federal government, none has felt the full impact as much as she has. On Jan. 26, 2016, Jeanette's husband, Arizona rancher LaVoy Finicum—while lawfully traveling from Harney County, Ore., to adjoining Grant County for a public meeting—was shot three times in the back while his hands were in the air. He was killed by law enforcement officers under the direction of the FBI, which had no warrant. The warrant was issued the following morning for everyone but LaVoy, who was already dead.

The month leading up to LaVoy's death was a rollercoaster for Jeanette. Burns, Ore., wasn't even on her radar until Dec. 31, 2015,

when her husband got a call from a friend, inviting him to join a small group of Utah and Arizona "patriots" who would be making a quick trip to Burns for a rally in support of beleaguered Harney County ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond. The plan was then to turn around and come straight back home.

It wasn't until LaVoy and his party got to Burns that they heard about the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and possible longer-term protest, including physical occupation of the refuge. Despite a lack of planning or preparation for such a scenario, when LaVoy heard about Ammon Bundy's proposal to take a hard stand at the refuge, he was all in. Consequently, his plan quickly changed from heading straight back to Arizona to staying in

Oregon as long as it took to try to help get things straightened out in terms of how the federal government had been treating ranchers in southeast Oregon. During the next month he often said, "As long as there is a single rancher here who needs our help, I will stay."

When LaVoy called home to talk about the change of plans, Jeanette said she wanted him to come home but LaVoy was determined to stay. After many years together, Jeanette knew that once LaVoy set his mind to something, changing his mind would be no easy task.

Rewinding a little bit, Jeanette and LaVoy met at a church-sponsored barn dance in St. George, Utah, in early 1994. LaVoy was as country cowboy as it gets. He was intelligent and a gentleman. They were both single parents at the time and LaVoy seemed to be a devoted father. When they concluded that they were supposed to be together, they were married a short time later, merging their two families. "We both had a mutual determination to treat all our combined children like they were our own," Jeanette says. "They were all part of the same family."

When they returned to the old Finicum family stomping ground of Cane Beds, Ariz., to develop a self-sufficient working ranch, they knew it would be character-building for everyone involved. At first they lived in a small, historic ranch house. But with the acquisition of the Tuckup federal grazing allotment to run their growing cowherd and the purchase of a new home in Cane Beds, by 2014 things were going well. Life was good. Then, in April 2014, the dispute between the Bundys and the federal government came to a head in Bunkerville, Nev. LaVoy decided to go and take a stand with Cliven Bundy. On Saturday, April 12, LaVoy saddled up to ride with Bundy's family and

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friends in their ongoing protest to secure release of their impounded cattle. (Check "Onslaught at Gold Butte" by Vin Suprynowicz in Fall 2014 and "The Occupation: A Dead Bill of Rights" by Judy Boyle in Summer '16 at www.rangemagazine.com.)

Jeanette remembers that day well. "I was more than nervous; I was scared to death.



ABOVE: Between the two families, Jeanette and LaVoy have 12 children. Shown here, left to right: LaVoy, Jeanette holding Tean, Thara, Tierra, Robert, Tawny, Arianna, Brittney, Thomas, Challice and Danielle at the Finicum corrals in 2001. Mitch and James were adopted after this shot was taken. BELOW: Jeanette and LaVoy riding together in Echo Canyon in the good old days. OPPOSITE: On Jan. 28, 2017, Jeanette and her family sponsored “The Meeting with LaVoy Finicum that Never Happened” in John Day, Ore., commemorating the one-year anniversary of LaVoy’s death. The event attracted hundreds of attendees and tens of thousands of viewers on Facebook Live. According to broadcaster Trent Loos, who emceed the event: “It felt like a good, old-fashioned tent revival that recharged attendees and left them on an emotional, spiritual, and patriotic high, wanting to do their part to advance the cause of liberty.”

The situation was completely different than Oregon. It was a real standoff with people lined up on both sides, with an army of federal officers pointing guns at normal Americans who were mostly unarmed. The men on horseback were unarmed; Dan Love and his army of Bureau of Land Management security contractors (i.e., mercenaries) were ready to battle. Although I understood why LaVoy wanted to be there, I was scared for him—and for everyone. But when that situation ended like it did, it calmed some of my fears.”

But that was just the start.

Even though LaVoy had a good working relationship with his local BLM agents on his own grazing allotment, his time in Bunkerville convinced him to take another stand. After studying the principles of prior appropriation, beneficial use, and the concept of private property interests in the split forage and water estates on federal grazing allotments, he concluded that ranchers own their own forage and water. He came to believe that there is no justifiable reason to have a permit with the federal government



for cattle to graze in those areas. Consequently, after a great deal of soul searching and following Cliven’s lead, LaVoy terminated his permit on the Tuckup Allotment. He intended to continue grazing his cattle without a permit, based on his ownership of the water and forage, but pay fees to the county.

Later, when LaVoy learned what the federal government was doing to Oregon ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond and decided to join in the protest rally to help support them, Jeanette was unconcerned. He wasn’t taking his horse this time. There was

no physical standoff. It was just a peaceful protest rally. In retrospect, she says, “Exercising our First Amendment right to peacefully assemble, protest and speak, gave me and everybody else involved unrealistic expectations and a false sense of security.”

A comparison would be the Occupy Wall Street protest which was ongoing for months with property damage and crime. “The Oregon peaceful protest became a teaching ground, for not only parents and children, but for the community.

There was no crime, no destruction.”

But her concerns quickly grew when she learned of her husband’s change of plans. “LaVoy got to Oregon and found that there was more to the equation—that federal oppression of ranchers in Harney County, Oregon, goes well beyond the Hammonds,” she says. “He fully embraced the idea of physically occupying the Malheur as a form of an ongoing peaceful protest against institutionalized federal injustice.”

LaVoy later explained, “I realized that when I crossed the Blitzen River and entered

the Malheur that I was crossing the Rubicon, and there would be no going back in terms of what we were setting out to do.”

At first, Jeanette tried to convince LaVoy to return home—sooner rather than later. Once she came to grips with the firmness of his resolve, however, and knowing what a good, principled man he was, she became determined to support him. She knew this was not something he was taking lightly, so she resigned herself to do everything she could to support his decision to take a stand.

Besides, despite the media feeding frenzy, the Malheur was completely different than Bunkerville and didn’t seem particularly

the meeting in Grant County. But that all changed on January 26, the day before his birthday, when she received the news that he had been killed.

“It was horrific to get the news the way we did,” she says. “It was horrific. Our youngest daughter was playing that basketball game and almost the whole family was there. We heard from someone at the game that there had been a shooting. I tried to call but my phone was dead and went into the school hallway to plug it into a charger. Lisa Bundy called, screaming and crying, over and over again: ‘They shot and killed LaVoy. They shot and killed LaVoy!’ It was

agents wouldn’t budge. “They claimed our cattle were in trespass and under threat of seizure and they wouldn’t negotiate until the cattle had been removed and we had paid any and all so-called trespass fines and penalties.” Rather than risk losing the cattle, she gathered and moved them from the allotment. “At this point, the federal government has taken my forage and water without any due process or just compensation.”

At first, Jeanette didn’t know how to proceed, but now—after how she has been treated—she knows where she stands. She decided to continue to fight to protect her property rights. She and her family are also busy marketing the novel LaVoy wrote in 2013, “Only by Blood and Suffering.” It was published the year before he died. It is helping to spread his message, using one of his signature quotes: “It matters how you stand.”

As part of an effort to take her own stand, that has also become Jeanette’s message. She has spoken at events from coast to coast and has become a passionate advocate for property rights and against federal overreach. On Jan. 28, 2017, she and her family sponsored “The Meeting with LaVoy Finicum that Never Happened” in John Day, Ore., commemorating the one-year anniversary of LaVoy’s death. The event attracted hundreds of attendees and tens of thousands of viewers on Facebook Live. According to broadcaster Trent Loos, who emceed the event, “It felt like a good, old-fashioned tent revival that recharged attendees and left them on an emotional, spiritual, and patriotic high, wanting to do their part to advance the cause of liberty.”

Jeanette recently announced that she and her family will be pursuing a wrongful death lawsuit, seeking accountability from the federal government for LaVoy’s death and the FBI’s role in it. At this point, it is undisputed that FBI agents lied about their involvement. There is a supposed ongoing internal FBI investigation, but little sense of optimism about how that investigation will turn out. Given ongoing evidence revealed about the shooting, however, there is growing confidence that the Finicum family may indeed find justice in this case.

In the process of everything that has happened, Jeanette Finicum has become an unintended celebrity in the patriot movement. It’s not a job she sought and it is not one she would wish on anyone, but it’s part of the hand she has been dealt.

It’s clear that she’s up to the task. ■



LaVoy leads Shorty up Canaan Mountain in 1995. Brittney rides the pack and Jeanette gets help.

dangerous. Any firearms were largely symbolic and nobody was actually pointing any guns at anyone. LaVoy and the other occupiers were coming and going at will and despite all the media spin, there was not much evidence that the situation could possibly escalate.

“It helped ease my fears when, halfway through the occupation, LaVoy made a quick trip home and spent a day and a half regrouping.” After that, Jeanette had a chance to visit the Malheur herself—the week prior to LaVoy’s 55th birthday. “I spent several days with him at the refuge. It was very calm and peaceful. I came away feeling safe.”

When Jeanette returned to Arizona for their daughter’s high school basketball game, things were going well at the refuge. LaVoy was in good spirits and looking forward to

an experience I would never want to repeat, or wish on anyone.”

There are still many unanswered questions as to why it happened. At this point, a year later, reality has long since sunk in, and Jeanette has found comfort in her faith and family. She has fully embraced the curve balls she has been thrown and is working hard to preserve LaVoy’s legacy and to continue his work. In addition to supporting her family, running the ranch, and dealing with federal agents, she has become an activist for fundamental freedom, liberty, and property rights.

One of the greatest challenges now is Jeanette’s figurative standoff with the BLM. “After LaVoy was killed,” she says, “I lived in daily fear that they would just come gather and impound our cattle on the allotment.” She attempted to negotiate a resolution but