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Merritt Timeline

First, I would like to state that I have a desire to run cross country and track in college. This spring, I placed second at Districts in the 1600m and beat the Arnold school record for the 800m and placed 8th at Regionals. This summer, I ran an average of 33 miles a week for almost two and a half months to prepare for cross country. I had a very good shot at qualifying for State this season. Now, my cross country season has been ruined. There is also a very real possibility of my track season being ruined as well, because it is not safe for me to be under the coaching of Frank and Regina Merritt and Stacy Flores. Junior year is a very important time for colleges to notice me, and I cannot waste this entire year. I am very worried about my future in running. If these people are still coaches for track season, my only option at this point is to transfer schools.

As a military child, I have moved far more than I would have liked. I have already attended three different schools in Bay county, and it has been very hard on me. This is the first semester that I have felt like I belonged at Arnold, and to switch schools again for only half the school year before I move states would be a very difficult challenge for me. Already, the stress that the Merritts have been adding to my life has worsened my mental health, and I am not sure if I could handle another major change in a healthy manner. Below is my story:

Oct 10, 2022– Naomi Frakes and I were invited to paddleboard with Samuel and Levi Merritt. The family was nothing but welcoming. A few weeks later, we were invited to attend a Bible study at their house with other athletes. This is included to show that I had always liked the Merritt family, and I thought that I was a friend to them.

End of May, 2023– The cross country team learned that Regina Merritt will be head coach for the upcoming season. I got a call after track season ended from Samuel. I answered, and on the other side was Frank and Regina. They told me that Coach Tom expressed some interest in training Remi Kepran and me over the summer instead of training at the voluntary practices with the Merritts. I was already aware of this; Tom asked me if this was okay a few weeks prior. Frank told me that this is a great idea, and said, “Tom will take two runners, I’ll take two runners, and we’ll race them. See who has the better training program.” The other two runners were Kennedy Flores and Samuel Merritt. This statement made me uncomfortable; it put unwanted pressure on me to beat Kennedy so that Tom’s training didn’t look bad, and it also put competitiveness in my friendship with her.

Mid June, 2023– Frank and Regina called me to ask if I still wanted to train with Tom. I said that I did. They were happy with this decision, and told me that I should stick to his training schedule and not mix in practices of theirs so that I do not get hurt. The rest of the call Frank discussed possible college scholarships for people on the team and complimented my leadership skills.

July 12, 2023– I went to a voluntary summer practice at Frank Brown. The only people to attend were Roman Howell, Casey Cook, Brandon Hill, Kennedy Flores, and Stacy Flores (Kennedy’s

mom and the assistant coach). I was skeptical of Roman's qualifications for being one of the new cross country captains. I asked him if he had ever ran cross country or track before. I did not say anything outright rude, but I was not welcoming. I have since apologized to Roman, and I made sure to be very friendly at the next practices I saw him at. When Roman started the run at a very fast pace, I realized that it is supposed to be a hard workout. Around three miles into the four mile run, I looked behind me and learned that the footsteps I heard were Casey's, not Kennedy's. I thought that maybe it would be best to finish the run, because if something did happen to her earlier in the run, Stacy could drive to get her faster than I could run to find her. When I finished my run I said to Stacy, "Ms Stacy, do you know where your daughter is?" She responded, angry with me, "Yep. She turned back around 'cause y'all left her." She seemed the most upset at me for not staying back for Kennedy, but I didn't know that it was my job to wait for her. It seemed like it was supposed to be a hard workout, and she would have held me back from the purpose of the run. I went over to check on Kennedy. I told her that I was sorry I didn't realize she wasn't behind me sooner, but she wouldn't look at me and seemed very upset at me. This shows that Kennedy was allowed to be upset and have a bad attitude for a practice, just like she should be allowed to every once in a while.

This same day, I was still curious about the other captain, Andrew Turner. I asked Samuel questions about Andrew, but instead of answering he gave me Andrew's number. I texted him, introduced myself, and asked what he did to be captain. I was only curious about if he had done track or cross country in the past, and how he knew the Merritts. When Andrew wouldn't answer my questions either, I kept pushing, and I did come across as rude. Since then, I have apologized and been very good friends with Andrew.

July 31, 2023— First official practice. I met Andrew for the first time in person. Before running, Frank talked to us about the upcoming season. I asked him a question in front of the group, clarifying if a variety team requires 7 or 10 runners. He told me that a varsity team can have up to 10 runners, and he did not seem to have taken my question rudely. Frank made it very clear to us that they will be taking the rule requiring a runner to attend 10 practices before competing seriously. I finished the speed workout, but afterwards the pain in my hip was really terrible for most movements.

Aug 3, 2023— Next official practice. I finished my workout early because my hip was too painful. I explained to Regina that it had been mildly hurting since June, but the speed workouts have been making it worse. I asked Regina if it is okay if I miss the next practice because I have already been scheduled to work. She said yes very willingly.

Aug 4, 2023— I missed practice for work.

Aug 7, 2023— Practice at Bid-a-wee beach. Regina told me to stop running early if my hip was hurting, so I did. We discussed taking 1 or 2 weeks off of running. I told her that this upset me because I worked very hard all summer, and I didn't want to lose all my conditioning by stopping. I tried to be positive and said that even if the cross country season doesn't go as well as I want it to, at least I will be better by track.

Aug 8, 2023– I attended practice to be a part of the team, but I did not run. Instead, Regina gave me stretches and exercises for my hip.

Aug 9, 2023– Practice was at West Bay Elementary. I didn't want to travel all the way there just to watch and stretch, so Regina and Frank told me it would be better to do a bike workout on my own. I sent screenshots of my workout to Samuel.

Aug 11, 2023– I attended practice, but didn't run because of Regina's guidance. Naomi Frakes, Kennedy, and I watched the 2 mile time trial and encouraged the team. Naomi sat out because of a back problem that she goes to a chiropractor for every once and a while. Kennedy was not feeling well.

That same morning, Cricket came to practice because Zayna invited him. While the team ran their warm up, I watched the Merritts tell Cricket that he cannot come to practice and expect to run without being cleared first. He is already cleared for soccer, so he assumed it would be fine. I watched them continue to embarrass him. They told him he can sit on the bleachers and watch. They didn't even want Cricket to watch with the team with those that weren't running. Cricket left instead. Zayna finished her warm up and saw him gone. She got upset. She told me that she already tried to ask if Cricket could come to practice, but Regina just looked at her message. She didn't respond to the message. Zayna called her mom to pick her up, and told Regina something along the lines of, 'My knee is really hurting. I can't run today. My mom is coming. I will see you on Monday.' I was there to watch all of it. Later, in the gym hallway, Zayna and I walked out of the locker room and we passed the Merritts. They practically cornered her to talk to her, and I kept moving, but I overheard their conversation. Frank chastised her more about what she did wrong that morning. They told her that she was causing a commotion. I would like to argue that Zayna left practice to avoid getting upset in front of the team and causing a commotion. No one except the coaches and I knew what happened. When Frank and Regina claimed that Zayna quit the team, they said that it was during this conversation with her in the hallway. This is a lie. I was there for the whole thing. Zayna did not quit.

Later that day, Naomi and I were driving when she told me that she quit the cross country team. She told me that Regina called her and her mom and convinced them that quitting is the best thing to do. For reasons such as; Naomi should focus on sprinting; Naomi should focus on basketball; Naomi is very injured and they are worried; Naomi is in worse shape this year than the year before; the more she is on the course, the more dangerous exposure she has to the elements. Regina also added that I would be out for 6-8 weeks, so there was no point in Naomi staying if I wasn't going to be on the team. Regina had never mentioned 6-8 weeks with me. This was a blatant lie. Last time we talked, we decided on a week or two to rest my injury before returning to running. After Naomi told me this, she realized that Regina manipulated her into quitting. Naomi now regrets quitting the team.

Aug 13, 2023– That evening, my parents got a call from Regina and Stacy. In the call, they were trying to find a reason for my parents to say that I should not finish the season. They said that I like track better, so I should heal up and wait for the spring. My parents told them that cross country is still good for me and I enjoy it. We don't know what my strongest sport is yet. Then, Regina said that instead of going to practice, I should go to physical therapy in the mornings. My

parents told her that it is important that I am at practice with my team. Since then, it has become clear that this suggestion by Regina was to keep me from my 10 practices that are required to compete. Then, Regina and Stacy mentioned that I have been 'different' lately. They brought up my interactions with Andrew and Roman, and the question I asked Frank at practice. After the call, my parents told me that I need to apologize for whatever it was rude that I had done.

Aug 14, 2023– I started practice with the intention of apologizing to Frank and Regina. After the team started their warm up mile, I asked them if they would please come talk to me. Stacy joined the conversation as well, although I didn't ask her to. I asked them what I have done to hurt their feelings, because I did not see what I did wrong. I was already friends with Andrew and Roman, and I didn't understand how I was rude to Frank when I asked him my question. I explained to them that I was only asking to clarify, not to embarrass Frank or prove him wrong in front of the team. They said that I also have been telling everyone that VitalityPro hurt me. This is not true. I have always been clear that my hip has been hurting since June, but the speed workouts the team did made it incredibly worse. It had also never occurred to me that I was being trained by VitalityPro. I did not sign up for VitalityPro, I signed up for Arnold High School Cross Country. Why would I tell anyone that it was the company that hurt me? Then, Frank told me that he had been getting reports of me 'dividing the team' and being rude. I asked him to tell me what I had done, so I could apologize to the people I was rude to, and so I knew how not to 'divide the team' further. He would not tell me, and told me that he wasn't allowed to talk about other people. The reports are a lie. The Merritts continuously hide behind the fact that they cannot talk about others so that they never have to provide real examples or proof. I also know that this is not true because I had made a conscious effort to be friendly and pleasant to the new runners, and I was making the best of their new training program that I wasn't used to. At some point in the conversation, Frank asks me if I am happy. I tell him exactly this: "I don't think it matters if I am happy or not, I am here because I want to run." He responds exactly like this: "It doesn't work like that. It's not your decision. If your unhappiness is dragging down the team, you can't be a part of that team." This was really disturbing to me. He was threatening to kick me off the team if I wasn't constantly upbeat and happy. Would I ever be allowed to tell anyone about a bad day I was having, or would that be dragging down the team? The whole time I talked with Frank, Regina, and Stacy, it was them accusing me of doing something wrong, and me trying to defend myself and explain that I never had any ill intentions. When I finally decided that this conversation was making the coaches more unhappy with me, I tried to apologize. Before I could even get it out, Frank walks away from me, saying "I need to get them stretched. It's not all about one person. We can't have favorites." This is when I left to ride bikes with Stacy that she brought for me. On our bike ride, Stacy talked to me about how wrong it was for Coach Tom to have had favorites, and seemed to blame me for that. I have noticed that 'not playing favorites' has come up in conversation more than once with these three coaches. Am I being punished for running with Tom over the summer and being one of his so-called 'favorites'? I have never expected special treatment from the new coaches once.

Aug 15, 2023– My dad brought an airdyne bike from his work to the track for me to use. At first, Frank was happy to see my dad, but he changed his attitude when my dad made it clear that they needed to have a serious talk. I was riding the bike right by the equipment storage closet

when their discussion started to take a turn, and my dad suddenly leaves and tells me he needs to go look up a policy. Later, I learned that Frank was kicking my dad out of practice, saying it was policy that parents cannot be at practice. After my dad was gone, I had a very good practice. I was encouraging to my teammates and I got to walk around the track with them. I did not have much interaction with Frank or Regina or Stacy. Later that morning, I got an email that told me that I will be separated from the team for a week because of my behavior and attitude. This could have been about my conversation with the coaches the day before, but I think that it is more plausible that it is because my dad came to talk to Frank and called them out on their threats. The suspension was to remind us that we had to toe the line, and that the Merritts had all the power to throw me off the team.

My dad sent an email to Regina, stating that it is important for me to be allowed at practice because of the important emotional and social aspects of being on a team. Regina tried to prove that I must not really care about the emotional and social aspects by saying in her reply that I only attended 2 out of the 17 voluntary summer practices, and I did not participate in 4 of the 9 mandatory practices at this point. This is when it becomes clear that the Merritts had a plan to get me off of the team this entire time. For one, they encouraged me to train with Tom over the summer and to not mix training programs, which contributed to my low voluntary practice attendance. Second, saying that I did not participate in 4 of the 9 practices is untruthful. I attended 7 of the practices, either running or doing hip exercises or riding a bike. For one of the practices I was given a bike workout to do on my own, and for one I was excused for work.

Aug 24, 2023— Over a week later, I finally had a meeting with Frank, Regina, Stacy, AD Green and my parents to get me reinstated on the team. A new assistant coach, Julio, was in the meeting also. He started helping after I was separated from the team. Frank insisting on having this extra adult in the room that was not even aware of the situation in order to intimidate me and make me feel like he had more authority over me. During the whole meeting, Frank talked about his medical expertise and how we were the ones that made meeting difficult to occur, instead of directly telling me what I did to be suspended from the team. Frank and Regina accused me of spreading rumors about them to the team since my suspension. I did not do this. In actuality, I told a few of my teammates the truth about why I had not been at practice, because they were my friends and I wanted to talk about it. Frank and Regina criticized our use of the word 'suspension,' when they would rather use the term 'cool-down period.' Later, when my mom questioned why Stacy was in this meeting, Stacy said that I had involved her daughter, so she had a right to be there. She is referring to when I told Kennedy Flores in Spanish class that I wasn't allowed to go back to practice for at least a week. I was not aware that telling my friends why I wouldn't be at practice was 'involving' them in this situation. I would also like to point out that I had been very close with Stacy. Her daughter and I did many things together. For Stacy to claim that she loves me and is worried about me, but then let Frank and Regina make false claims and suspend me from the team is absolutely wrong. I think that Stacy felt that she was forced to agree with the Merritts' lies about me so that they would keep me off the team, allowing Kennedy to have a better chance at advancing to State. Throughout the meeting, Frank brought up multiple times that I never apologized in our conversation we had the day before I was suspended. I would like to make it clear that I was trying to conclude with an apology, but

Frank cut me off and walked away before I could do so. Also, Frank outright lied multiple times about things that he said. He denied saying that I shouldn't get to be a part of the team if I wasn't happy, and denied accusing me of slandering his company. The way that the Merritts played the victim during the whole meeting almost had me questioning my own argument, and that maybe I had taken this whole thing too far. I now realize that Frank and Regina are gaslighters. They were purposefully trying to confuse me and make me feel like I had been the one creating the problems. Frank also tried to intimidate me during one part of the meeting; although neither of us were talking, he felt that it was necessary to stare me down for over twenty seconds until I looked away. While I'm sure he would deny this, I thought that it would be worth mentioning. At the end of the meeting, nothing had been resolved. I still did not know what I had done to deserve my suspension, and I did not get an explanation for why it was wrong to tell other kids that I was not allowed at practice. I didn't even get an answer on if I was allowed to go back to practice. AD Green told us that they would let me know by lunchtime if I could come back. If this was a 'cool-down period,' why did we have to decide if I was on the team or not?

Aug 26, 2023— The first meet of the season. I rode with Ian and Remi Kepran to watch the races and support my teammates. During the whole meet, I was getting many judgemental/odd looks from the runners. Some of them joined after I left, and others had heard negative things about my reason for being gone. Either way, forcing me out of practices did not allow me to make friends with my own teammates, and I felt they already had formed bad opinions about me that I did not have a chance to change. Additionally, Stacy came in for a hug, but I politely declined. She seemed annoyed that I refused her hug.

Aug 27, 2023— Regina sent an email to my parents. To get back on the team, it required me to sign a copy of the Sportsmanship Agreement that I did not break. It also did not allow my parents to ever come to a practice as it was against their policy. This is suspicious. What do they want to hide from my parents so badly? The next requirement is that I will have to drag the airdyne bike over 100 meters to the other side of the track where I will be isolated from everyone once again. Right outside of the storage closet was already a very convenient place to use the bike. Moving the bike across the track was an attempt to humiliate me and keep me physically separate from where the rest of the team meets. Next, I have to keep my valuables locked up. This is because Stacy, Frank, and Regina have all brought up to me that there have been rumors of kids recording them during practice. I have never once heard of this or attempted to do it myself. They want to keep my phone away so that I cannot record them. While I am aware that it is against the law to record someone without their consent in Florida, why is this such a threat to the coaches? What are they saying at practices that they do not want proof of? Finally, Regina requires a note from a medical doctor that will allow me to return to running on the track/road, and then another note to allow me to compete. This is ridiculous, because no medical doctor had ever been a part of my injury at this point in time. I had seen an athletic trainer and physical therapist that told me that I could run to tolerance. The only people that have tried to make me stop have been the Merritts. My parents did not respond to this email. My parents told me that I am no longer allowed to have contact with the Merritts or Stacy

due to the hostile intent of the e-mail. They told me that they care about my mental and emotional health, and being around the Merritts would not be good for me.

Sep 12, 2023– Regina removed my parents and me from the cross country GroupMe. This was uncalled for, because we had never said that we did not agree with her requirements to get back on the team. We all interpreted that being removed from the GroupMe was an indicator that I was no longer a part of the team. As I mentioned, Regina required a doctor's note which takes some time to get. Additionally, my parents told me that they were working through the process with the district. I thought everyone was looking for options to work through this, but instead I was kicked off.