

January 24, 2002 Thursday

**Willises still seek answers;** **Bauer's 'sorrow' rings hollow, say parents of kids killed in van crash**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD--Janet Willis, whose six children died in a fiery 1994 crash, had four words to say when she recently came face to face with the man who wouldn't investigate the illegally licensed trucker involved in her family's horror.

"I'm praying for you," she told Dean Bauer, the former secretary of state inspector general and the highest-ranking member of George Ryan's inner circle to fall in the bribes-for-licenses scandal.

That was all she could think of or say to Bauer that day last October when, after his lengthy deposition in a civil lawsuit, he stood up, walked over to her and, in their only direct encounter ever, stunned her by expressing his condolences.

"I'm sorry about the loss of your children," she recalled him telling her.

In disclosing this emotional exchange publicly for the first time Wednesday, the Rev. Duane and Janet Willis said they're not sure whether Bauer was attempting to apologize.

Bauer's attorney won't speculate on his client's motives.

But then and now, the Willises say they think Bauer's words carry a hollow tone, given how he repeatedly dodged questions under oath about his decision to kill a politically sensitive probe that would have shown how trucker Ricardo Guzman obtained his Illinois commercial driver's license with a bribe and how corruption flourished while Gov. Ryan was secretary of state.

"I don't know that was an apology," she said of Bauer's words. "I didn't know how to take it, what to say. I don't know what a person's motives are, why he said that. But it just didn't match up with what we'd seen the two hours previous to that. It was a shock when he said what he did to me.

"People are sometimes sorry that children died. I understand that. That could have been genuine, but it wasn't consistent."

A half-dozen times on Oct. 2 of last year, Bauer invoked his Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination when asked questions relating to his decision to nix the Guzman probe in the face of compelling evidence of corruption uncovered by special agent Russell Sonneveld.

Willis' attorney, Joseph Power Jr., wants a state judge Friday to compel Bauer to answer the questions or hold him in contempt.

Guzman was behind the wheel of his 18-wheeler when a piece of his rig fell onto a Milwaukee-area expressway and into the path of the Willis family's minivan.

Duane and Janet Willis survived the crash with severe burns, but their six children perished. It was quickly learned that Guzman, with the help of an intermediary, obtained his trucker's license by bribing a corrupt worker at the McCook state licensing facility.

Last year, Bauer pleaded guilty to a charge of obstructing justice after admitting he asked a former secretary in October 1999 to destroy two important documents subpoenaed by federal prosecutors, including a memo Bauer got relating suspicions that Guzman's license was fixed. Bauer's felony conviction resulted in a yearlong sentence in a federal penitentiary and the loss this week of his state pension, health benefits and life insurance, which the Chicago Sun-Times reported Wednesday.

As part of Bauer's plea agreement, he admitted that government prosecutors had evidence to prove he terminated or held up sensitive investigations, including the Guzman case, to spare his boss and lifelong friend George Ryan from political embarrassment.

While Bauer's attorney Edward Genson long has contended that his client did not have anything to do with the deaths of the Willis children, Genson would not comment on Bauer's motives in approaching Janet Willis in a conference room in Power's Loop law office. But he confirmed Bauer's attempt to express "empathy" to her.

"I was not there during the exchange, and it would be inappropriate for me to characterize the reasons for it," said Genson, who was in an office hallway when Bauer and Janet Willis spoke.

Janet Willis said Genson tried to convey similar sentiments and that she tearfully waved him away, having said all that she could muster a few moments earlier to Bauer.

"It was very difficult to talk. I was about ready to cry, and I couldn't get too much out," she said. "That's about all I could say. Those are the only words that could come out."

Duane Willis insisted that his wife wasn't intending to sound pious when she told the cancer-stricken Bauer she was praying for him. It was the truth, he said, stressing that truth is the only thing that matters to his family right now.

"In fact, we both have prayed. We have prayed for his health. But we mostly have prayed that he'd just tell the truth and just get this thing out so he wouldn't have to live the rest of his life hiding information," he said.

"I'll take [his word] for what he said and just feel real strange that somebody could say that, and yet they denied cooperating," Duane Willis said. "It's kind of the mystery of being a human being. You sometimes do contradictory things."