

From: Julie K. Mesaros
To: PA House Judiciary Committee
Re: Written Testimony - House Bills 1 & 2

Please find below a letter I wrote and mailed to all PA legislators about 2 years ago. Since the Department of State failed to do its job back then, I am still watching and waiting for an opportunity to obtain justice.

I will attend the March 29 hearing, but I understand that members of the public are not invited to speak. Therefore, I submit this letter as written testimony for/at the hearing.

January 22, 2021

Dear [PA Legislator]:

I'm writing to tell you about my experience of child sexual abuse. Respectfully, I urge you to **support HB 14** and **promote a referendum** that would empower adults like me to retroactively recover damages from my abuser and/or the institution by which she was employed.

Let me explain why this action matters so much to me. Thanks to advocates like Rep. Mark Rozzi, I have the courage and avenue to tell you my story.

I'm 42 years old and I've been a PA resident since birth. From 1993-1997, a married woman who was my high school teacher and coach groomed me emotionally from age 14 to 17, leading to an ongoing sexually abusive relationship that lasted more than a year. For her, it was a side relationship that she could explain away and move on from. For me, it was disastrous, the effects of which continue to this day. The sexually abusive relationship was necessarily secretive, shameful, inhumane, and therefore damaging to me in the following ways.

(1) My father was an administrator in our school district throughout my schooling. He had interviewed and hired the teacher/coach/perpetrator and he thought highly of her. She was petite and feminine, married to a man with whom she had two children. Her husband was also a teacher/coach at our high school. So, no one would have suspected that she would do anything wrong to me. By the time I was in 12th grade, my father was the school district superintendent. If anyone had found out about the emotional grooming and sexual relationship, my father and our family would have been humiliated.

(2) That same-sex relationship was the first I had ever considered having with any girl or woman. I was ripped 'out of the closet' before I even knew I was in it. During my first year of college, as our sexual relationship reached peak intensity, I developed severe anorexia nervosa and lost one-third of my body weight in 6 months' time. I was hospitalized for 6 weeks and had to take a medical leave for a semester during my 2nd year of college. I had received a full scholarship to play Division I basketball, but I was too physically weak to continue and gave it up after becoming so ill.

(3) Depression and alcohol and substance abuse ensued along with continuing anorexia throughout my young adulthood. I battled with self-loathing and denial about my sexuality. It took a long time to figure out and accept myself. I was not sure if I had a natural inclination toward bisexuality or if that sexually abusive relationship made me so. The thought of coming out to my parents was always tied up in great fear that they would reject me because of my 'affair' with the teacher/coach/perpetrator, which worsened when I learned later that it was in fact sexual abuse. By the time a psychotherapist finally said the words 'sexual abuse' to me, I was about 28 years old and I had

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already made a serious suicide attempt. I was in disbelief that I had been a victim of sexual abuse. The thought totally disgusted me. Disillusionment gave way to deeper self-loathing and fear of rejection than before.

(4) By the time I learned about child sexual abuse laws in Pennsylvania, the statute had already tolled for me. Even if I had understood in time, I would not have had the financial and emotional wherewithal to pursue a civil claim.

(5) The emotional and physical toll cannot be overstated. Stunted mental and physical growth during adolescence results in serious consequences: Poor relationships and underperformance in school and jobs, to name a few, along with the mental health problems mentioned above. I can never get those years of my life back, nor can I undo the sequelae that continue today.

(6) The financial consequences also cannot be overstated. I estimate the costs of medical and mental health treatment, and losses of my athletic scholarship and lifetime earning potential to amount to at least \$1 million.

(7) Post-traumatic stress is an unwelcome yet permanent guest. This means the intrusion of flashbacks on my everyday thinking, without my intentionally calling the past into mind. Some flashbacks are elicited by benign things in the environment, as with certain songs that come on the radio. Other flashbacks are triggered by news of sexual abuse--e.g., the Catholic church; Sandusky, Cosby, Hastert, Nassar, and many others--which can feel, secondarily, as if it's happening to me.

(8) Moreover, I still have the 40+ letters and cards that the teacher/coach/perpetrator wrote me from 1995-1997. There are numerous letters containing sexually explicit musings on her attraction to me and recollections of our physical encounters. She also wrote of how she was sexually curious about and attracted to me when I was in high school, creating in my mind a sexualized overtone of myself from 9th grade (age 14) onwards. Hence, memories of almost every phase of my life default to her sexual abuse of me.

It wasn't until 2011 that I had the insight and wherewithal to file a 5-page complaint against her with the PA Department of Education's Professional Standards and Practices Commission. Its investigation resulted in the teacher/coach/perpetrator surrendering her teaching certificate. A glance at the PDE web page under *Notification of Certification Actions* reveals that almost 2,500 educators were adjudicated for misconduct from 2005 to today. In 2019, I took action to inform her then-employer, Dickinson College, about her sexual abuse of me, and as a result she was separated from there. I also contacted the PDE's Commission more recently to offer to speak publicly about my experience. The executive director invited me to address the commission, so they can hear from a victim face to face and learn how the teacher groomed me for several years before a physically sexual relationship developed. The address has been postponed due to the pandemic.

Respectfully, I urge you to act to allow adults who as children were harmed by our state's very inadequate child protection system to now obtain justice. If it's only a matter of making such action constitutional, then why not make it so and let justice take its course? The Catholic church, public schools, and other institutions have attorneys and insurance, which for public schools are publicly subsidized. Please join me in advocating for adults who were

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sexually abused as children, when they had no voice, no money, and no understanding of rights, laws, or what had happened to them until it was too late.

Please vote in favor of HB 14. Please encourage your constituents to approve the referendum. Should you need an adult survivor to speak at a hearing, you can call on me. I will be ready at any moment.

Sincerely yours,

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Born and raised in Franklin County, PA