

NEWS & RECORD

TEACHER WINS AN APOLOGY, LOSES NAIVETE\ FALSE SEX-ABUSE CHARGES

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A student's false charges of sexual abuse cost teacher Tammy Shaney her job, her name and 2 1/2 years of her life.

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They had tickets to go see ``CATS' that night, a whole group of middle school teachers did, to celebrate the start of spring break, 1991.

So when the two men she thought at first glance were Jefferson Pilot agents came to her front door late that afternoon, Tammy Shaney was rushed and confused. They were Greensboro police detectives, it turned out, and they wanted her to follow them downtown to discuss a student. In the next hour, in a tiny interrogation room, the popular 32-year-old gym teacher's life was about to be changed irrevocably. She was read her rights, arrested and charged with sexually assaulting an eighth-grade girl two years earlier.

By the time a uniformed officer took her to be booked, Shaney realized that this was no mix-up and no joke. ``On or about' a string of dates from the 1988-89 school year, the charging document said, she was accused of forcing the eighth-grader to go into an office near the gym, take off her clothes and perform homosexual acts, once at gunpoint. All together, the charges carried a penalty of 88 years.

Ultimately the student would admit in writing that the charges were completely fabricated. But that took 2 1/2 years and the filing of a slander lawsuit by the teacher, who in the meantime lost her job, reputation and thousands of dollars in legal fees.

Before it was over, the story would send a chill through teachers all over the system and raise lingering questions about police methods.

But at the beginning it all happened quickly - the mug shots, the fingerprints, the panicked phone call to a lawyer, the numb drive home.

She sat up all night in her front room, waiting for the morning to come and the newspaper to hit the driveway.

``I sat right here waiting for the paper,' Shaney recalls, looking out at her quiet street.

``I knew that once I read it in the paper, that it would all be over. My reputation, everything. It didn't matter that I was innocent. All that would matter was that I was 'charged with...''

It had been a good year at Southeast Middle School that year. Morale was decent, things were coming together, and some of the staff credited a young, first-year P.E. teacher as part of the reason.

Shaney started her career in the city system at Jackson Middle School and had taken a year out to work at Federal Express. Moving boxes, she'd made \$10,000 a year more than teaching, enough for a down payment on a house.

But just six months into it, she was already knocking on the doors of the local schools looking for her old teaching job back, missing the students.

The Federal Express boxes didn't talk to her, as she liked to put it, didn't come asking for her advice on important problems, never came back for a visit.

To her new co-workers at Southeast Middle School, Shaney was the original, hands-on teacher, and it showed on her job evaluations.

Exuberant and outgoing, the teachers could hear her coming in the hall.

She helped set up a program for students at risk of failing, buying up a load of broken lawn mowers and power tools to teach small-engine repair. She ran an after-school exercise program for the teachers. She was Santa Claus at their Christmas party.

One day, during a heated fitness session at the track, a student fainted and Shaney carried the girl the length of two football fields back to the building. The students liked her.

``She could identify with them. She was very youthful, but she still had control over her class,' said Richard Koritz, father of one of Shaney's students.

``She brought out the best in my daughter.'

Shaney's background didn't hurt - a troublemaking adolescent who was perpetually grounded. Her father died when she was young, leaving her mother to raise three children in the small town of Brevard.

Shaney had a few good teachers along the way and looked at her options after high school graduation: put herself through college, or get a job at one of the plants, buy a Camaro and cruise up and down Main Street for the next 20 years. She picked college.

On the night of March 22, 1991, the young teacher sat in a dark Winston-Salem theater, staring at the lighted ``CATS' stage, barely taking in the songs and the costumes, everything obscured by the bad dream that was just beginning.

At intermission her seat was empty, and by the next morning her friends would know why.

For Joanne Wilson, who taught home economics at Southeast, news of the charges came just two days before Wilson was to chaperon a group of 80 students on a spring break trip to New York.

``It suddenly hit me that anything can happen,' Wilson said.

``A student can make a statement and can destroy your whole life and your career. It terrified me.'

Christina Lomax had a twin sister at Smith High School. But if you didn't know it, you would hardly put the two together.

Satrina was tall and thin, pretty, academically gifted, outgoing and well-liked.

Christina, plump and more plain, kept to herself and a few close friends. She was a solid 'C' student, caused little trouble, attracted little notice.

So when the charges surfaced in early 1991, they seemed to classmates all the more out of the blue.

The allegation was that two years earlier, when Christina Lomax was still at Jackson Middle School in 1988-89, a female P.E. teacher had taken her into a gymnasium office on at least four occasions and forced the girl to perform sex acts, at one point threatening the girl with a handgun.

Lomax, by 1991 a Smith High sophomore, made the charges one month after reading newspaper stories involving a girlfriend and schoolmate who became sexually involved with another Jackson teacher, Rebecca Hayes, during the '88-89 school year.

Hayes, a Spanish teacher at Jackson that year, was arrested and charged with taking indecent liberties with a minor after police found dozens of passionate, often explicit letters the teacher and student had exchanged when the girl was only 14.

With Hayes going to court in January 1991 and pleading guilty, the story had been in the news for about a month when Lomax, then 15, approached a guidance counselor at Smith and said she could not stop thinking about the Hayes case.

Asked why, Lomax said ``that happened to me, too' but refused to elaborate.

The following day, according to Greensboro police documents, Lomax told Detective Ronnie Slaughter that she had been repeatedly sexually assaulted by a female gym teacher at Jackson Middle School and threatened with a gun.

Though Lomax did not name the teacher, Slaughter asked her if the teacher was Tamara J. Shaney, using her formal name.

Lomax replied, ``Her name is Tammy Shaney.'

Slaughter later handed Lomax a copy of the Jackson school yearbook with the gym teachers' names blacked out, according to the report, and asked Lomax if she could point out Shaney's picture. She quickly did.

``Christina stated to me, 'Do I really have to look at her picture.' She also stated to me, 'Do I have to ever see her again?' ' Slaughter wrote in his report.

``Based upon this information is how it was determined that the teacher in question was Tamara Shaney.'

While Slaughter has declined to comment on the case in the past, citing the confidentiality rules of the department's Youth Division, the investigative reports filed in the case show in part how the charges against Shaney began to snowball in the spring of 1991.

By March 9, two weeks after giving police her first statement about Shaney, Lomax had threatened to take an overdose of medicine at school.

She also told a counselor at the rape crisis center, Turning Point, that she had a piece of glass in her purse and was considering cutting herself.

That spring, Lomax said in a deposition, she went to Charter Hospital for counseling and wound up in the same support group as the girl in the Hayes case.

Lomax said in the statement that she and the girl became friends only after the Hayes story ``had been in the papers and everything. That's when we became real good friends, after it had come out.'

Newspaper attempts to contact Lomax's mother were unsuccessful, and Lomax declined requests for interviews last week after she signed the apology and out-of-court settlement of Shaney's slander lawsuit against her.

The settlement involved no money, only a written statement by Lomax that all the charges against Shaney were false.

However, a close friend to Lomax, 17-year-old Ginny Watson, said Lomax afterward insisted the charges were true and that she had signed the apology to Shaney only to get out of the lawsuit.

Watson, another former student of Shaney's, said she didn't know which side to believe.

``The stories of (the Hayes case) were a lot like the stories of Christina's, and I thought about that,' the friend said.

``Maybe someone really did hurt Christina, and she can't come out and tell who really did it.'

For police, the case apparently began to fall apart when Lomax admitted that she had sent a sexually suggestive note to a female teacher at Smith the same spring that she was making the allegations against Shaney.

The frightened Smith teacher, well aware of Shaney's situation, turned the notes over to detectives.

Lomax, who still lives with her family on Lovett Street, at first denied that she wrote the notes.

But she later admitted it, saying to the detective, ``I thought if I wrote the notes, she (the Smith teacher) would pay attention to me. I didn't tell the truth because my momma was in the room the day you asked me about it.'

During the same July interview, the report says, Slaughter also asked Lomax why she had lied about Shaney assaulting her.

There were basic discrepancies in the girl's claims. Shaney didn't have a gun or even a starter pistol.

She could not have locked the office door, as the girl claimed, because it wouldn't lock from inside.

The office description was wrong and the dates didn't match gym class dates. The two could not have been alone, as Lomax contended, without Shaney leaving a class of 30 girls unattended.

Nevertheless, it would be another five months before the case was finally closed, after Lomax failed a police lie-detector test and Shaney passed.

While all this was taking place, Tammy Shaney's teaching contract with Guilford County was not renewed. She had been suspended immediately upon her arrest and prohibited from coming on school grounds, even to clean out her desk.

Struggling to make her mortgage payments, she collected unemployment for a time. For the first few months of job interviews, she told the truth about why she left teaching. Then she began to leave that part out, picking up work at a rental center and a mortgage company.

The students in her health and P.E. classes at Southeast finished out the year with a substitute and were never given any explanation of why Shaney left.

Despite Shaney's fears, the story never went public until she filed the slander suit a year later, so her absence was initially a mystery.

``It was immediately hushed up,' recalled Joan Bass, a fellow teacher and county president of the N.C. Association of Educators. ``If the children asked, we were not to say anything. The children had a lot of questions. They missed her.'

Finally, some of the students wrote her letters.

``I heard you were OK but something 'just came up,' ' one said. ``That's all anyone will tell me.' Another wrote, ``Hurry back if you can. You're the best.'

Last August, to the astonishment of some co-workers, Shaney did come back to teach health at Northeast Middle School.

By year's end, she would have her criminal record expunged, her defense fees reimbursed by the NCAE and a written exoneration signed by her accuser.

But she doesn't have a clean slate.

``That naivete that I looked at kids with - I'll never get that back,' she said.

``I think I was born to be a teacher, and these kids - especially at that age - need somebody who wants to see the good side in them.

``Maybe because I don't see that side as easily now, I don't look as hard.'

For the teachers who worked with Shaney and all along knew the reason for her abrupt exile, the story echoes as well.

Into their classrooms has come an uninvited guest - tension and guardedness - and they watch their backs.

Debbie Woolard, a social studies teacher at Southeast Middle School, doesn't get so close to students anymore, doesn't close the door for private conferences, doesn't pat children on the back.

After the final day of school last week, Joanne Wilson sat in her empty home economics room still wondering why it happened to Shaney, the person Wilson held up as a model of the kind of teacher she herself wanted to be.

``It made me afraid. I just kept thinking, of all people, all teachers to even be accused, why her? It shouldn't have been her,' Wilson said.

``It took all the fun out it. It did for me.'

Even for Shaney's old friend Sue McLawhorn, veteran of 17 years of teaching, it hasn't been the same.

Between the windshield wipers on her way to Jackson in the morning, she would see the young boy she used to offer a lift to the bus stop, to keep him from getting soaked and cold by the time he got on his bus.

These days, McLawhorn would drive right by.

She knew she should pick him up, but she couldn't take the chance.

_ \ TEXT OF STUDENT'S WRITTEN APOLOGY TO TEACHER \ ``I apologize to Tamara J. Shaney for the sex abuse charges filed against her in 1991. I now realize, after having received professional counseling, that there was no validity to the charges of these or any other crimes against me by Ms. Shaney, and that the prosecution should not have been

brought. I understand that this apology is in consideration for the dismissal with prejudice of the civil lawsuit brought against me by Ms. Shaney, and the execution of a mutual release by her and me. This 7th day of June, 1993.' \ - Christina L. Lomax\ Source: Documents in Guilford Superior Court.

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A TEACHER FALSELY ACCUSED

Jan. 3, 1991 - A Spanish teacher from Jackson Middle School, Rebecca Hayes, is accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female student. Hayes later pleads guilty to taking indecent liberties with a minor and is sentenced to seven years in prison.

Feb. 22, 1991 - A girl who is a classmate and close friend to the victim in the Hayes case tells police that she, too, was sexually abused two years earlier by a female teacher at Jackson Middle School, health and gym teacher Tammy Shaney. Shaney is arrested and charged with first-degree sex offenses, suspended from her job and later loses her teaching contract.

April 1991 - The student accusing Shaney, Christina Lomax, writes a letter sexually propositioning a female teacher at Smith High School. Confronted by police, Lomax later apologizes, saying, ``I thought if I wrote the notes, she (the Smith teacher) would pay attention to me.'

December 1991 - Prosecutors close the case against Shaney after police find that Lomax ``showed deception' on a lie detector test, while Shaney passed the test.

Jan. 21, 1992 - In an unusual civil action, Shaney sues the student for slander and malicious prosecution.

August 1992 - Shaney, after working odd jobs for more than a year, is rehired by the county school system.

June 7, 1993 - Lomax admits the charges were false and apologizes in writing to the teacher, settling the slander lawsuit out of court the day it was to be tried.

https://www.greensboro.com/teacher-wins-an-apology-loses-naivete-false-sex-abuse-charges/article_2038a4de-b188-5a34-9a99-6be6b1d3f3dc.html