



Fake rape claim fills woman with remorse

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Debra Wood wants to say sorry.

Sorry to the man whose life she has ruined by falsely accusing him of sexually attacking her.

Sorry to police for wasting their time.

Sorry to her family and friends for the pain and hurt she has put them through.

A Wellington District Court judge last week ordered the 22-year-old Upper Hutt woman to pay \$88,537 to the Wainuiomata man she had accused.

But with no job, it is unlikely she will ever be able to pay any significant amount.

Her conviction for perjury - she was released from prison last October after serving 15 months of a two-year sentence - is making employers wary. She expects to be declared bankrupt.

"I feel really remorseful for what I've done. It's taken me a long time to admit that," she says.

Debra Wood struggles to explain why she accused a man she barely knew but says she was "going through a hard time with life." She was in a violent relationship and had tried to kill herself.

She says that suicide attempt was the reason for the deep scratches on her breasts, chest and neck which she told police were caused by her attacker.

She had talked to the man she accused only once, but identified him to police.

He was arrested, held in custody for 15 days and seven months later taken to trial, after Debra Wood had repeated her false story numerous times.

Meanwhile, Wellington's Independent Rape Crisis Centre has received a barrage of obscene mail in response to its household appeal after recent publicity over men falsely accused of sex crimes.

Support worker Amy Ross says she was shocked to receive about 15 replies ranging from obscenities to ripped-out copies of media reports about false rape reports. They followed the mailing of about 40,000 appeals to Wellington households.

It coincided with media reports this month about Debra Wood and the compensation award for the man she had falsely accused.

Other men cleared of rape subsequently spoke out, including former Waikato University student Nick Wills.

Lawyer Roger Laybourn, who represented Hamilton teacher John Edgar when he was accused of indecency with pupils two years ago, has blamed pressure from organisations such as Rape Crisis for pushing false accusations as far as court.

But Ms Ross says the publicity distorts the truth about false accusations, which are rare. Conversely, only 10 per cent of rape victims are estimated to go to police.

"This is about faults in our justice system. This isn't about nasty, dangerous women complaining or about nasty organisations like us pressuring police."

Ms Ross says the centre raised \$10,000 in its last household appeal in 1993, but there has been little response this year.

"And the response we have had has been abuse - it really shocked me.

"It makes me sad when I think we still have so far to go."

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