

Sex misconduct haunts schools

By Joey Bunch *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

Posted:

DenverPost.com

The handsome high school track coach lifted Jennifer's chin and leaned in to kiss her as they parked in a forest near Colorado Springs.

She was 15. She stiffened and withdrew. The married man in his late 30s slid back in the seat of his truck, apologizing, promising it would never happen again.

But soon it did, and soon they kissed often, and by the time she was 17 they were regularly having sex.

"I lost my virginity at school," said Jennifer, a woman in her 40s. She didn't want her name published because she has moved back to her old neighborhood.

Each year untold scores of Colorado students like Jennifer are sexually involved with coaches and teachers.

Since May, eight Front Range teachers have been arrested and charged with sexual misconduct with students. Many more go uncaught, advocates for victims argue.

The accusations range from years-long affairs to the most recent: Green Mountain High soccer coach Gary Wegner, 40, who was arrested on Nov. 11, accused of inappropriately touching seven 13- and 14-year-olds in his Dunstan Middle School shop classes.

This year, 10 states passed tougher laws against teacher-student sex, but Colorado was not among them. Neither advocates nor state education officials knew of anything in the works, either.

"We do whatever the law requires us to do at the district level," said Mark Stevens, spokesman for the Colorado Department of Education. "We're the implementers, not the ones who create the laws."

Sexual misconduct is the largest single cause of state-level teacher discipline, according to licensure data.

Since 1997, the department has disciplined 78 teachers for sex assault on children. Eight more were disciplined for sexual misconduct with adults.

Those numbers are proportionally small, with more than 832,000 students and 50,000 faculty in Colorado schools.

"You have to talk about it"

The small number of cases doesn't surprise Karen Moldovan, a former teacher who is program manager of the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

"Sexual abuse is probably the most underreported crime there is," she said, "especially at schools."

Jennifer reported her relationship with a coach 30 years ago.

"He was well-respected in the community, and I was nobody," she said. "I thought I would be the one vilified."

She said he "groomed" her, convincing Jennifer that he was her protector during her difficult teen years as she dealt with a tough family situation.

Over time, he applied pressure for intimacy.

"He convinced me we were having an affair, and that the worst thing I could ever do would be to tell," Jennifer said.

What followed were decades of low self-esteem, sporadic treatment and a failed marriage to a man who also abused her, she said.

"You have to talk about it," she advised other victims. "I moved 14 times in 16 years and it followed me every time."

The Rape and Incest National Network estimates 1 in 14 girls in grades 5 to 8 are sexually abused to some degree — statistically about two girls in every classroom.

In grades 9 to 12, the estimate is 1 in 9 girls. About half as many boys are abused, according to RAINN. Those statistics do not account for how many abusers are teachers or coaches, but they too often fit the profile, Moldovan said.

Legislative battles

"The vast majority of sexual abuse is done by people children know and trust," Moldovan said, referring to 93 percent. "It's very typical for it to be a teacher or a coach, people children are taught to obey and trust."

Jennifer noted the statute of limitations had run out on her case. Earlier this year, she hoped in vain to testify before a legislative committee, on behalf of the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault, for a bill to waive the criminal statute of limitations for sex assault on children.

She was never called.

In 2008, for the second time in three years, Colorado lawmakers killed legislation to give victims of childhood sex abuse more time to file civil claims against abusers or the institutions that employed them.

The Colorado Catholic Conference, the Catholic Church's political arm, fought the bill.

Other states — Arizona, Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Maine — this year took steps to prevent such affairs and toughen punishment on violators.

A review of the 20 most recent Colorado teacher-sex cases found nearly all the offenders served three months or less in jail, accompanied by probation and a sex-offender designation.

Tougher penalties

In 2009, Florida made jail time mandatory after high school students in Tampa proposed the change after learning only one of 10 local teachers had served jail time after being convicted.

Georgia this year made sex with any student illegal, in response to a 28-year-old teacher's being found not guilty despite sex with a 16-year-old, because the age of consent in Georgia is 16.

In Colorado, a person under 15 years old can consent to sex only with someone up to four years older, but a person 15 to 17 can consent to sex with someone up to 10 years older.

Georgia also now requires character education for teachers, stressing the consequences of crossing boundaries with students.

Susan Payne, executive director of Colorado's Safe2Tell, a student crime tip line, said the state needs programs to screen teachers better and avert problems.

"I wish all of our teachers and coaches had a good understanding of proper, effective educational tools, safety and parameters for what's acceptable and what's not acceptable," she said. "But evidently many of them don't."

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Teacher sex cases in 2010

Nov. 11: Gary Wegner, 40, a Green Mountain High School soccer coach, was charged with inappropriately touching seven 13- and 14-year-old girls in his shop class at Dunstan Middle School in Lakewood.

Oct. 15: Marcel Rivera, 78, a substitute teacher at Doull Elementary in Denver, was charged with sexual assault on a student.

Oct. 14: Fort Lupton High School track coach Ray Phillip Brown, 56, was charged with inappropriately touching a student in Weld County. He is facing similar charges in Adams County, filed in August.

Sept. 21: David Anthony Rangel, 28, admitted molesting two 16-year-old girls in his classrooms at two different Greeley high schools where he taught

Aug. 31: Timothy Derby, an elementary school teacher in Larimer and Jefferson counties, was sentenced to three years in prison for molesting a 10-year-old girl, who was the daughter of a family friend.

July 20: Damien Lambert Wesley Iringan, 29, a substitute teacher in Aurora, was arrested when he arrived to meet a teen - who was an undercover detective - he had chatted with on the Internet.

June 29: Longmont High School language arts teacher Alex Laird Tinsley, 51, was investigated after customers in a Starbucks saw him caressing the bare leg of a student younger than 16, then investigators found illicit text messages on the girl's phone.

May 12: former state high school wrestling coach of the year, Travis Masse, 28, was charged with having sex with a 17-year-old student at Broomfield High.

April 27: Linda Lewis Trabucco, 44, a former English teacher at the Collegiate Academy in Littleton was sentenced to probation for five years to life after pleading guilty to for a three-year sexual relationship with a male student, beginning when he was in the ninth grade.