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Abuse of power

Recent coach, teacher misconduct no surprise to experts

by Alexandria Rocha and Bill D'Agostino

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Kids called him "Mr. G." He was a beloved Jordan Middle School physical education teacher who also coached volleyball and track and field for more than a decade.

Bill Giordano now sits in San Mateo County Jail for allegedly molesting two of his former students when they were 13 and 14 years old.

Just two weeks before Giordano's Aug. 18 arrest, the director of a youth emergency response training program was charged with videotaping and having sexual relations with three teen-aged girls in separate incidents. He now faces up to 12 years in prison. In a third case, a highly-involved soccer coach and substitute teacher was convicted of giving alcohol to four 18-year-old women members of his private soccer club team. (See sidebar.)

The men in each of these cases are -- or were -- established educators in a community that prides itself on quality education. The arrests have left many wondering how it could happen in Palo Alto. But what happened shouldn't come as a surprise, according to psychology professionals.

In areas such as Palo Alto, where children engage in numerous demanding activities that often operate with little oversight, the risk is apparent, experts say. Alarming, there is little districts or sports organizations can do to weed out coaches or teachers with ill intent and, once in the organization, there's little done to ensure such incidents don't occur.

About 5 percent of school teachers and coaches nationwide have sexual encounters with minors, said Thomas Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University and a recognized expert on sexual abuse. In the general adult population, the incidence of child sexual abuse is about 8 percent, he added.

"If I was a betting man in Vegas, I would bet that the situation in Palo Alto is not going to be the end of it. It's only a matter of time when those cases come to light," Plante said.

In Palo Alto, sports and extracurricular activities are considered gateways to top-tier colleges. According to the schools' accountability report cards, about 75 percent of Gunn and Palo Alto high school students participate in after-school programs and spend long hours with the coaches and educators in charge.

While that type of involvement and dedication is widely respected, there are pitfalls.

Teachers and coaches are given a tremendous amount of power and control over situations where a student is "highly motivated to keep that teacher or coach happy," Plante said.

"Palo Alto can be a stressful environment for kids trying to get into sports and teams and top-notch colleges and they may be overly dependent on these coaches and teachers to nurture them along," he said. "A coach that has this predilection can potentially violate that trust."

Case in point: the Explorers, the emergency response team founded by Tony Graham, who now faces molestation charges. Some involved with the program said it took over their lives.

"You become so dedicated to the program, you put it in front of everything," said one former member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The Explorers program, which requires a year-long commitment from students, began with an intense four or five-day camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains, according to former participants of the program. It was run like a boot camp, with early morning hikes and physical drills. On the first day, which was in the winter, everyone was required to bathe in outdoor military-style showers.

Paly graduate Toni Dano, 18, who was in the program from 2002 to 2004, said the academy was essentially meant to weed out students who could not make the demanding time commitment.

"It's a really intense program," said Dano, who has gone on to San Jose State University. "I just remember spending my whole life. ... It was hours of work."

Similarly, the world of youth sports has the ability to take over an athlete's life. The most serious student-athletes often play on their high school team and a separate club team, such as those operated under the California Youth Soccer Association.

Van Gastel's club soccer team was part of CYSA.

John Murphy, chairman of CYSA, said most of the association's teams and affiliate leagues are dedicated to recreation. However, he said, a small

percentage are hyper-competitive and operate on a "win-at-all-cost" level.

Those athletes spend countless hours practicing and playing. They travel to away games and play in tournaments outside the Bay Area, sometimes across state lines.

"My approach -- which is overwhelmingly the majority approach -- is to help kids become responsible, mature, successful adults, meaning we view kids as human beings," Murphy said. "The other view is that the objective of youth soccer is to create league players for national teams. That's the professional sports model.

"If you view it that way, generally speaking, you're more likely to view the players, in essence, as a commodity. Perform-or-die type of thing," he added.

With thousands of teachers, coaches and program leaders in charge of such active youth, Plante said there are inevitably those who will act on a temptation to sexually victimize a child.

"That's a sad but tragic reality," he said.

Parents and teachers who have these serious students and athletes should trust their instinct when something seems amiss, Plante said.

Sexual abuse "doesn't happen overnight. (Predators) engage in grooming behavior. When a coach or a teacher wants a lot of private time with a student, takes an unusual interest in them, wants to see a student ... at odd hours, weekends or evenings," Plante said. "They're grooming the trust so the sexual abuse can occur." (See sidebar.)

This bond also makes it difficult for victims to speak out against their abuser.

Nixon, a local psychologist, said 88 percent of sexually-abused children never step forward. The woman who recently came forward in the Giordano case waited 14 years to reveal the alleged abuse.

"They love the person and the person loves them -- they're just doing it in an inappropriate way," said Nixon, who earned his doctorate in psychology at Stanford..

"Many of these folks who do these things to minors are often sociable, highly liked, good teachers and coaches ... and many don't want to believe that such a wonderful teacher, coach, Boy Scout leader ... could do such a bad thing," said Plante.

"Sometimes victims get blamed as well, since many can't believe that so-and-so would do such a thing."

Since the trio of arrests, critics have noted there is little done at the district level or among coaches to prevent this type of behavior. Besides the district's basic sexual harassment policy, the guidelines given out to coaches and teachers read more like suggestions than rules, and nobody seems to be watching closely.

Others point out it's tough to identify a sexual predator. Employees of the local school district have to undergo fingerprinting and a background check. Unless someone has a prior offense on his or her record, though, it's nearly impossible to detect a bad apple.

"You can recognize lepers, but you can't recognize sex offenders. They look like everybody else," Nixon said.

Fingerprinting does ward off some sexual predators.

"When somebody knows they're going to be fingerprinted they usually don't bother to apply," said Michael McKibbin, a member of the state Commission on Teacher Credentialing who has also taught school-law courses at San Jose State University.

The district's sexual harassment policy outlines general conduct violations, such as "sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal, visual or physical conduct of a sexual nature." However, the policy includes no detailed language regarding what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate interaction between adult supervisors and students. Each school's teacher and coach handbooks try to tackle such guidelines, but they end up mixing firm rules with some that read more like suggestions. One guideline in a handbook given to Gunn coaches tells them to "*avoid* an inordinate amount of practice with one athlete," and another says "*do not* take athletes to your residence."

Besides sexual harassment trainings required for district employment, there are no specific teacher orientations about conduct with students, only the occasional reminder for those who work with students outside of school hours.

There is an obvious need for such guidance. McKibbin noted there is no rule against driving a single student home or going behind closed doors with a student, yet both are considered inappropriate. McKibbin and Assistant Superintendent Marilyn Cook said most new teachers enter the profession a bit naïve.

It's common for new teachers to seek positive relationships with students through friendships, which is not appropriate either, they said.

"We draw that distinction," Cook said.

Since last month's arrests, Cook has compiled the best practices from each school's teacher handbook into a district wide manual. She also ordered

materials from the YMCA relating to interactions between adults and minors in Y programs.

Outside of school, coaches of league teams -- depending on their level of experience -- can take a wide range of trainings offered through umbrella organizations, such as the CYSA. Such training is not mandatory.

Murphy said the best protection for kids at that level is to have parental involvement.

"Someone was teasing me that I wanted to hire every grandmother in the state to supervise every game and practice," he said. "There is nothing as great as a grandmother. They will walk through a brick wall to protect a child." School board member Cathy Kroymann said there needs to be a heavier emphasis on making sure students know it's OK to tell an adult about incidences they feel uncomfortable about.

"We're all have to be vigilant about watching and reporting suspected incidents that we might see," she said.

In addition to the paucity of information given to teachers governing a relationship, there's little if anything given to students or parents about sexual harassment or other kinds of teacher or coach abuse.

School board member Cathy Kroymann said such education needs to start early and at home. In light of the recent arrests, the school district uploaded a list of sexual safety resources with links to information on its Web site. (Visit www.pausd.org/parents/sexual_safety/index.shtml.)

The PTA is also holding a conference Oct. 26 at the district's Churchill Avenue office to talk about sexual abuse, harassment and assault.

Sexual-safety instruction does not happen until high school, when a student takes a life skills class.

Parents should start sex education at home as early as preschool, Nixon said.

"The majority of parents, well-educated college grads, have a good amount of knowledge about this, but a lot of them are very afraid of the topic," he said. "It shouldn't be just one talk. It needs to be an integrated thing. Consult with people. There are enough books out there."

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