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Courting an Education

By Stephanie Heinatz

For nearly 10 minutes, recorded cries of a young girl being held captive in her own car pierced a Suffolk courtroom. More than a dozen juniors and seniors from Lakeland High School listened in stunned silence.

Between choked-up words and voice-shattering sobs, the 17-year-old pleaded to be let go.

But her captor, David Lewis Gray, answered only with snarls and screams.

She begged him not to hurt her, not to kill her.

He threatened to punch her in the face, and insisted she have sex with him before the night was over.

That night finally ended for the Suffolk girl, whose name is being withheld to protect her identity, last week when Circuit Judge M. Jacobson sentenced Gray to five years and eight months in prison.

Gray pleaded guilty in February to abduction and assault and battery.

For the students, who were in court that morning on a field trip to learn about the criminal justice system, hearing the girl's story proved to be just the beginning of a crucial lesson.

"It's important young people see and observe what happens in the criminal justice system," said Suffolk's Commonwealth's Attorney, C. Phillips Ferguson. "We literally bring hundreds of students here every year. You learn inside a schoolhouse. But you can also learn inside a courthouse."

Especially, Ferguson said, when students have the opportunity to hear a case that involves a crime in which they could easily become a victim.

Dating violence is, unfortunately, a fact of life for teenagers. It's likely that one in every 11 high school students has been hit, slapped, physically hurt or forced to have sex by their boyfriends or girlfriends, according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.

"I guess," said Leslie Judkins, one of the visiting students, "it could happen to anyone."

In the beginning, it was love, or something like it.

She was a young 15, completely infatuated with a 20-year-old man.

For awhile, the girl's parents knew very little about Gray, said prosecutor Marie Walls.

"They didn't really like that she was dating an older man," Walls said.

But, with little reason to doubt the man their daughter called her first love, they allowed the relationship to continue for more than two years.

Then, in February 2004, the girl's parents ordered their daughter to stop seeing Gray, the girl said. They'd discovered Gray was on probation because of an earlier burglary conviction.

"I broke up with David at one point because my parents found out he had been to jail," the girl, now 18, testified in court.

At 17, though, it was hard for her to stop seeing the man she thought she loved.

She continued to visit Gray's house almost every day, according to court testimony.

Gray would visit her on her lunch and dinner breaks from work at a local grocery store. And in July, she said, they tried briefly to rekindle the relationship.

"But that was only for about a week," she said.

In her mind, they were just friends.

In Gray's, she belonged to him.

On Sept. 6, 2004, Gray said he was supposed to meet her at his house.

"She never showed up," he said in court.

So he drove to her place, where he found her car sitting in the driveway.

Gray tried calling.

"She didn't answer her phone," Gray testified.

He decided to wait, parking his car down the road from her house.

But it was hours before she returned, he said. When she did, it was in the car of another young man.

Gray continued waiting in his car until the other man had left, Walls said. Then he approached the girl and accused her of cheating on him.

She said the man was just a friend who had recently returned home following a deployment to Iraq,

“He got loud and she didn’t want her parents to hear,” Walls said. “She pacified him and told him she would talk to him tomorrow.”

The next day, Gray visited the girl several times where she worked, begging her to go talk, Walls said.

Even though she said she was trying to be clear that she didn’t want to talk to him, he was determined to get her alone, Walls said.

To ensure that would happen, shortly before she got off work at 9 p.m., he let the air out of her tires, Walls said.

When she walked outside, the sky already dark, he was there, offering to ride with her to the nearby gas station.

With the understanding that a friend follow them to the gas station in his car, she agreed to let Gray in her car, not knowing then that he was the one behind the misdeed, Walls said.

Once they inflated the tires, though, Gray grabbed the girl’s car keys and cell phone, forced her back in her car and drove off, Walls said.

Over the course of the next few hours, Gray managed to take her cell phone and instill enough fear in the girl that she became afraid to run, afraid to fight, afraid to do much of anything, the prosecutor said.

By midnight, the girl had convinced him to let her go, but not before the conflict was documented. In the midst of the struggle, a friend’s phone number was inadvertently dialed when a cell phone button was hit. No one answered, and the call went to voice mail, leaving a recording of much of the horrific encounter.

As the young girl’s cries echoed through the courtroom, Leslie Judkins sat wide-eyed and in disbelief.

No one, she said, had ever talked to her about the dangers of dating violence.

Gray made it even more confusing to the teen by telling the judge, “I was in love. I didn’t want to lose her.”

Why would you do that to someone you love? she wondered.

“These girls get in over their head,” Walls said. “As a young girl, she may have confused his control with love.”

Walls said even though Gray is still in jail, he frequently asks about his former girlfriend-turned-victim.

“It’s troubling he’s not over her,” Walls said. “Because until he is, she’s not safe.”

That’s one lesson Courtney Burch, another teen in the audience, has known for awhile.

“My mom used to be married to a man who thought it was OK to fight her,” Burch said. “She always told me that that’s never OK.”

Admittedly, listening to the young girl’s tale of being abducted was difficult for the visiting teenagers, even for those who know a little about dating violence, said Diana Klink, spokeswoman for the Commonwealth’s Attorney’s office.

But if just one of them decides to get out of an unhealthy relationship as a result of their day in court, Klink said, then whatever discomfort they felt while listening to that tape will have been worth it.

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Tips for Dating Safely

- Double date the first few times you go out with a new person.
- Know exactly where you’re going on a date and what time you plan on returning home. Share those plans with a parent or friend.
- Remember, alcohol and drugs decrease your ability to react.
- Leaving a party with someone you don’t know well? Make sure you tell a friend you’re headed out. Ask that friend to call you later to make sure you made it home safely.
- Be firm and straightforward in your relationships.
- Trust your instincts.

SOURCE: Suffolk Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office

Help is available for teenagers involved in an abusive relationship.

To talk to someone about ending the relationship or how to remain safe, call:

- The Genieve Shelter (757) 925-4365
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

How can I tell if my date will become abusive? Ask yourself the following questions: “Does your boyfriend or girlfriend exhibit the following traits?”

- Extreme jealousy.
- Explosive anger.
- Unpredictable mood swings.
- Controlling behavior, for example, not letting you have friends and often checking up on you.
- Abuses alcohol or drugs and pressures you to use them.
- Takes your money.
- Cruel to animals or children.
- Calls you names alone and in front of others.
- Abused former partners.
- Threatens violence.
- Grabs, shoves, pushes or hits you.

SOURCE: Suffolk Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office

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