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Victims of Rapes by Athletes Go Public

By Juliette Terzieff, WeNews Correspondent

BUFFALO, New York (WOMENSENEWS) – Kathy Redmond understands all too well what being raped by a popular athlete and the turbulent aftermath, does to a victim.

Shortly after the start of her freshman year at the University of Nebraska 13 years ago, she claims Christian Peter, a nose tackle on the football team who would go on to play professional ball for the New York Giants, allegedly assaulted her twice in a two-day period.

Terrified of the potential public reaction, Redmond says she waited two years to report the rape to university police.

“I was afraid of how Nebraska would react,” she says. “Nobody really understands how being raped and then becoming public enemy No. 1 to the team and its fans can damage a victim.”

Redmond isn't afraid anymore. The 32-year-old now heads the National Coalition Against Violent Athletes, an advocacy group for victims based in Littleton, Col., that she created after settling a civil suit out of court in 1997. So far, it has helped over 250 victims of rape by athletes.

Although the coalition is the only one operating in the United States that targets victims of rape by athletes specifically, informal networks of victims are growing. Some rape victims also say fears of public reaction are fading, in part due to instances of a changing attitude in the media towards their stories.

Convictions Rates Lower

Conviction rates for those cases known to involve athletes accused of rape hover around 30 percent, far less than those in normal rape cases, which is over 80 percent.

“There is a need for more focused advocacy,” says Sarah Graham Miller, spokesperson for the Washington-based Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network.

“Every rape counselor can get a victim to the hospital or help them talk to police,” Miller says. “But victims of these high profile situations have more needs; the bar is higher for every facet from prosecution to recovery and that means they need more specialized aid.”

A new incident involving athletes and assault emerges every two days according to Redmond's organization, one of less than a handful of organizations trying to collect data on the phenomena. But with less than 20 percent of victims ever coming forward, the actual number of many women and young girls are assaulted by athletes in a year remains unknown.

"You have to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and when an athlete walks into the courtroom the reasonable doubt is right there," says Redmond. "Jurors, lawyers, judges, law enforcement – everyone – is thinking 'he's on television; I've seen him do charitable work; he's a stellar guy, a hero' and immediately they identify with the athlete."

Multi-Million Dollar Industry

Grooming, training and marketing sports stars is a multi-million dollar industry that takes root early on as universities invest alumni donations heavily into their athletic programs.

"Players know if they do anything wrong, the first thing you do is go and talk to the coach," Redmond says. "We're the only country in the world that ties its sports to education. We condemn Third World countries for how they treat women, while what we allow as 'boys will be boys' behavior is just as bad."

"Victims need a place to turn for help where they won't be further victimized," says Redmond. "I want to make sure when the fight is over, that victims are recovered, healthy individuals."

Some news organizations have begun to become more sophisticated in their coverage of athlete violence. Still many victims are scared off from making criminal complaints by the potential flurry of media attention and subsequent public reaction and the damage it can do them and their families. Redmond says they are further quieted by the knowledge that in most high profile cases – such as the allegations against Mike Tyson and Kobe Bryant for example – the victim is often vilified by the press, the fans and the big business of national sports. In the Kobe Bryant case, the prosecution dropped criminal charges after confidential details of the case were leaked to the press. Earlier this month, a civil suit was settled out of court with undisclosed terms.

"Most people realize the world of athletes is a different realm and victims are often seen as being groupies, wanting to be part of that world, therefore having asked for the treatment they received," says Redmond.

Tornado-like emotions follow a rape, says Amy McQuillin, a public relations professional who has accused baseball player Carlos Perez of raping her in 1999. "You have to do something, but you don't know what it is. It takes everything you've got to muster that last shred of trust to try and move forward . . . knowing, that when you do, you risk being turned from a victim into some sort of diabolical perpetrator."

Perez, who has been accused of rape by McQuillin and two other women, has steadfastly maintained his innocence and has never been brought to trial. He says the allegations are "lies," according to an extensive article on Perez in the Detroit Free Press.

McQuillin says that she initially did nothing.

“I had worked in professional sports for years and knew a lot of people in the media. I just couldn’t bear the thought of them scrutinizing my life,” she says.

A week after the incident McQuillin says occurred; Perez was the subject of a rape complaint by another woman. McQuillin says she decided to step forward. The other woman subsequently asked police to drop the case. McQuillin’s case also was not pursued by the Atlanta prosecutor. She filed a civil suit and entered a legal labyrinth that she says she remains in today.

A third woman, Mandy Bernard, also accused Perez of rape in 1995 when he was a pitcher with the Montreal Expos. Despite strong evidence – including 92 police photos of damage to her body and articles of her clothing recovered from Perez’ hotel room – Bernard’s case also never made it to trial.

For now, Redmond’s organization is the only one operating in the United States that targets rape by athletes specifically. For her efforts, Redmond says she has received multiple death threats and had three cars vandalized.

Informal Networks

But informal networks of victims reaching out to each other are forming.

Those who’ve sought out Redmond’s help form a loose network of victims and families willing to seek out other victims.

Two of the women allegedly assaulted by Perez recently connected – through a Detroit Free Press Reporter Michael Rosenberg researching Perez’ career – and found a joint energy to help others.

“We feel better talking to each other,” says Bernard of her recent connection with McQuillin. “I had the whole episode effectively locked in a box in my head for years trying to forget and it’s incredibly therapeutic to be looking for ways to empower or prevent future victims.”

“We just want to reach out and let future victims know they have a cheering section too,” says the 28-year-old.

Fading Fears

For both women their initial fears of media and public reaction have faded away.

“The irony is that media coverage has ended up being helpful, made me feel vindicated in some way,” says McQuillin.

“So many women have come up to me and said ‘I have a friend who was raped in college, I’m so glad you are doing this’, and you wonder just how many women out there are afraid to stand up,”

adds McQuillan who appeared on a Good Morning America segment last year about athletics and rape.

“Society is coming around to the idea that athletes and rape does happen,” believes Redmond. “The media is reporting it more, even the sports pages are more sensitive to the issue.”

The two, who are in contact with Redmond, are soul searching for ways they can turn their pain into action and healing.

“I may not know why I’m doing this or what the end game is supposed to be, but the goal for now is to be out there turning a negative into something positive,” says McQuillin. “If women know more about this, if they remember hearing about other victims, then they might make better choices.”

Juliette Terzieff is a freelance journalist currently based in Buffalo, N.Y., who has worked in the Balkans, the Middle East and South Asia for the San Francisco Chronicle, Newsweek, CNN International, and the London Sunday Times.

For more information:

National Coalition Against Violent Athletes: <http://www.ncava.org/ncavamain.html>

USA TODAY – “In Sexual Assault Cases, Athletes Usually Walk”:
http://www.usatoday.com/sports/2003-12-21-athletes-sexual-assault_x.htm

Detroit Free Press – Michael Rosenberg – “The sad story of Perez and his accusers”:
http://www.freep.com/sports/rosenberg/rose21e_20041221.htm

InteractiveTheatre.org – Out of Bounds: The Truth About Athletes and Rape:
<http://www.interactivetheatre.org/resc/athletes.html>

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