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In teacher-student sex case, a double standard

Public reactions more lighthearted because accused teacher was female, student male, some say

By Michelle Manchir, Tribune reporter

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Underscoring the public conversation about the arrest of a female Plainfield North High School physical education teacher seems to be the double standard virtually unavoidable in sexual crimes.

Reaction might have been different, perhaps more one of outrage, some say, had the teacher been a man and the teen a girl.

The teacher involved in this case, Ashley Blumenshine, 27, who had coached gymnastics in addition to her teaching duties at the school since 2006, has pleaded not guilty to aggravated sexual assault. But a Will County assistant state's attorney has said both Blumenshine and the teen admitted to having sex.

Plainfield police found them in a vehicle behind a Kohl's store Jan. 4.

With interest in the case reaching far outside of the village, some members of the community have questions about what it means to call the teen a victim.

"Everyone thinks that just because it's a boy it's not a big deal," said Mary Welch, whose grandson attends Plainfield North. "They kind of took it lightly because it isn't a girl."

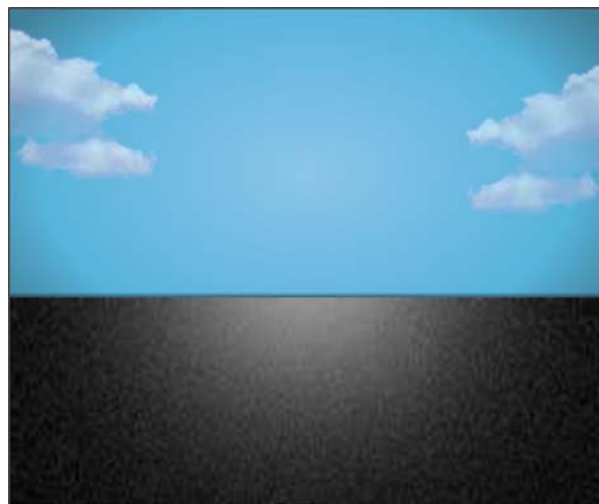
Welch said she has heard giggles and lighthearted chatter among some students and parents since the incident occurred.

Patrick Bergman, a Plainfield father of a boy in elementary school, said there may have been more community uproar had the incident involved a female teen.

"You're talking about testosterone-filled adolescent boys," he said. "They're going to be more-than-willing participants."

The jokes and the perception that the teen involved falls short of victimhood is not uncommon in these scenarios, said Juanita Ortiz, an expert on crime and gender and a professor at the University of Illinois

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at Springfield.

"When boys sexually interact with older women they're viewed as lucky," she said. "When girls sexually interact with an older male it's seen as them being victimized."

But that kind of thinking is shortsighted, Ortiz said. Minors of any age are not cognitively developed enough to make important decisions about sexual interactions or able to "fully understand the consequences of such actions later in their lives."

"There should be repulsion when either an underage male or female has sexual contact with an adult," Ortiz said.

Joel Falco, a psychologist based in Elmhurst who treats people with problematic sexual behaviors, said complicating the situation is the perception that men and boys want sex all the time, which makes it hard for people to think of a boy as the victim.

As a teenager, he's perceived as being nearly a man, Falco said. "The adolescent girl would be seen differently."

Numbers are hard to come by for sexual crimes involving teachers and students. The Illinois State Board of Education doesn't track teacher certification revocations by arrest, and state police don't track arrests by occupation.

No group tracks the number of teacher-student sexual assaults, said Charol Shakeshaft, an education professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who has researched educator misconduct.

"Districts may have let teachers resign without bringing the abuse to light," Shakeshaft said. "Some abuse will be in local police records, but not all."

The Will County state's attorney's office, which is handling the prosecution, declined to comment on the case or on how it handles sexual assault cases in general.

The Cook County state's attorney's office says that, from a legal standpoint, a person's sex plays no role in how such a case is handled but that social mores can still influence the outcome.

"Society may take a different view of these cases, which could in turn translate into the potential jury pool," Cook County state's attorney's office spokesman Andrew Conklin said.

At the high school, students have responded to the incident with curiosity and grief, said Tom Hernandez, a Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202 spokesman. Some students seemed to react as though there'd been a death.

"The teacher was here one day, and gone the next," Hernandez said.

For Bev Jordan, a Plainfield mother, the situation makes her nervous about sending her three elementary-school-age boys, who now attend private schools, into the Plainfield district.

"I feel like it's kind of being swept under the rug," she said. But, she added, "it doesn't matter where they go, it can happen."

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