

# **My school failed me after I was sexually assaulted**

**By Dani Erickson**

Trigger warning: this blog discusses sexual assault and may be disturbing for some readers.

I'm sharing my story of sexual assault so others can understand its long-lasting impact on survivors. My assault occurred in October 2020 when I was 14. The person who sexually assaulted me--then my on-and-off crush--was 15. I later learned from others that he committed multiple sexual assaults. The day before the assault we planned to visit a wooden fort in the woods surrounding a park. I hoped we would cuddle--but nothing else. I assumed he would want to be sexually intimate, being a male, and had mentioned it before. But I thought he would respect me when I said I did not want to do anything sexual. At one point he told me he didn't understand when girls say they aren't ready and called me a tease. I soon became fearful and was intimidated by his size. The assault lasted 3 hours, and had I not found a way to escape, I cannot imagine what more would have happened. I went home, numb, and unable to cry-- which was odd for me. I couldn't look in the mirror for weeks without dry heaving. I felt gross, disgusting, shamed, betrayed, and violated. I had many nightmares, and just a few days after the assault, I began losing fragments of my memories of the assault.

A few weeks later I reported him to the police through the Safe UT app.

## **The legal findings**

He plead guilty to third degree felony of Sexual Abuse and a misdemeanor charge of Unlawful Detention because he prevented me from leaving when I told him I wanted to leave. But the consequences he received were minimal: he was fingerprinted, his DNA was placed into the system, he was to complete 10 hours of community service, and required to attend level one therapy at a sexual behavior treatment center for juveniles. That was all! People get the same number of hours for trespassing! While I am grateful that I was believed, I am still deeply hurt that the only punishment he received was a slap on the wrist instead of serving jail time or other long-lasting consequences. I, on the other hand, continue to have panic attacks, my education has been derailed, and I may experience the aftermath of the assault for my entire life.

## **The impact of the assault on my education**

Although I was able to complete half of 9<sup>th</sup> grade in junior high because my assaulter attended high school, I eventually dropped out. When I enrolled in high school, I saw my assaulter every day, initially as many as six times in a single day. When one of his friends and I made eye contact, he laughed in my face. There was a rumor that a few of his friends wanted to beat me up. I went to the school's office saying I needed to talk to the vice principal but nothing was done; I never connected with him. Once the secretary even asked what was going on and after I explained the situation, she said she'd let the principal know. But I never heard from him, the Title IX Coordinator, or anyone else. I couldn't get up in the morning anymore and I constantly skipped class. My grades and attendance were drastically affected.

Because the sexual assault didn't occur on campus or during a school sponsored event, my school wouldn't take responsibility for its impact on my education. The school should have done more to help me feel safe. Instead, they watched me have panic attacks and hyperventilate in their offices during meetings because I felt hopeless and fearful. Although I had a protection order, it was inadequate. Instead of accommodating my needs, a school counselor told me, "Maybe an alternative school would be better for you." As if I were the problem--which I wasn't! I discovered recently there are many other [supportive options](#) my school could have offered me but did not. I'm homeschooled now because I couldn't handle seeing him anymore. I can safely say, I will probably never go back to that school again.

I miss school and the learning opportunities that are only possible at school. I've always been an extroverted girl, and while I still see my friends, I miss out on opportunities to make new friends at my school -- and so much more. School is supposed to be a safe, fun, learning environment, but I never felt like it was any of those things after I was assaulted. There's almost a sense of grief because I don't know if I'll ever feel safe enough to go back to school and regain the motivation I had at earlier in my life.

Here's what I plan on doing to advocate for survivors (and you can too):

1. I'm organizing a protest in my city.
2. I'm using the resources on Stop Sexual Assault in Schools [website](#) and learning about Title IX.
3. I'm planning to create a [SASH club](#) (Students Against Sexual Harassment) in my area or online.

I recommend visiting the SSAIS [website](#) to find activism toolkits and more. You may want to read this [article](#) about the fourth anniversary of #MeTooK12 with links to helpful resources. Check out the SASH Club [presentations](#) for teens.

I hope sharing my story will urge other students and survivors to advocate for change. Survivors want to feel heard and seen. Schools claim to care so much about their students' mental health but really do not. If they did, they would prioritize student safety over protecting their reputations.