

An open letter to MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon

May 2, 2017

Dear President Simon,

A few days ago I began receiving texts and email messages from family and friends asking if I had seen an article in the Washington Post. This article contained excerpts of statements and emails from you and your staff related to the sexual assault allegations against Larry Nassar. The article left me deeply disturbed. In particular, President Simon, I am disturbed by the statement you made when you told the MSU Board of Trustees, “I have been told it is virtually impossible to stop a determined sexual predator and pedophile, that they will go to incomprehensible lengths to keep what they do in the shadows.”

“Virtually impossible to stop a determined predator and pedophile?” President Simon, if this is what you have been told, you need new advisors.

Are predators highly skilled? Many are.

Do they sometimes get away with predatory behavior for years? Unfortunately, yes.

Is it because they are “virtually impossible” to catch? Emphatically no.

Instead, predators are left to prey on children for years because the adults in authority either miss or refuse to see the many clear warning signs.

Over the last several decades research into pedophiles and serial child abusers has grown vastly, pinpointing attributes of abusers, dynamics that allow abusers to flourish and, most importantly, how to prevent and stop a sexual predator. A significant portion of this data highlights the areas of consistent failures that allow predators to abuse unchecked. The information is there, it is readily accessible, and it is information you need if you wish to keep this from happening on MSU’s campus again. And it doesn’t conclude that predators are “virtually impossible to stop”.

One of the foremost experts in the psychology of sexual predators is Ann Salter, who interviewed hundreds of sexual offenders and distilled her findings in her book, *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, And Other Sex Offenders* (Basic Books: 2003). One of the most disturbing revelations she makes is that “all the offenders had been reported before by children, and the reports had been ignored.” *All of them*. Every single offender had been reported previously. And the reports had been ignored. No, these highly skilled predators were not “virtually impossible to stop”. They were not stopped because adults in authority didn’t properly respond when children and young adults reported abuse to them. President Simon, does this sound familiar?

Many studies, including a leading study entitled *Selection, Engagement and Seduction of Children and Adults by Child Molesters*, (Jewell, Jensen, Jensen & Bailey, 2002), make the reason for this clear. Abuse goes unchecked not only because adults are not properly trained to recognize the

signs of abuse, but because adults ignore or dismiss the signs of abuse, *because they do not want to believe it*. Perhaps the way your head gymnastics coach, Kathy Klages dismissed the complaints of two separate young gymnasts as far back as 1997 because she didn't want to believe Larry's penetration of their vaginas could be anything but medical. Perhaps the way two unnamed officials in the athletic department decided that Tiffany Thomas Lopez's "issue" with being penetrated by Nassar was due to her "misunderstanding". Perhaps the same way an unnamed athlete just a year earlier was silenced with the same rationale, also by officials in the athletic department. Perhaps the same way the Title IX office determined in 2014 that a patient's complaint of sexual abuse was due to her own "misunderstanding," as if she was not competent as a young adult to know the difference between medical treatment and assault. "Virtually impossible to stop"?

Rather than telling the trustees that child predators are "virtually impossible to stop", maybe MSU officials should be handed a copy of Carla Van Dam's book, *Identifying Child Molesters: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse by Recognizing the Patterns of the Offender*. (Routledge: 2001) Van Dam specifically states one should never confront the accused sexual abusers, warning that child sexual predators are typically "charismatic people who can concoct plausible excuses for their behaviour and seek to shift the blame to other". Perhaps then Kathy Klages wouldn't have phoned Larry Nassar to let him know of at least one gymnast's disclosures to her. Perhaps then just one official who had been told that Larry Nassar was penetrating young girls for "medical treatment" would have researched this alleged technique themselves, instead of believing Larry's own guarantee that, of course, it was purely medical.

Rather than resign themselves to the fact that predators are "virtually impossible" to stop as you seem to suggest, perhaps those involved in youth sports programs should read the section in Van Dam's book which discusses a significant problem with institutional coverup in youth sports programs. In particular, they may have been helped by the information that "offenders develop personal relationships with other staff and these relationships then neutralize the potential of disclosure when sexual contact between them and children occurs." This might have caused Coach Klages to pause for reflection before encouraging current members of the gymnastics team to sign a card for Larry after the allegations were made to "let him know that we're thinking about him."

Perhaps the Trustees and MSU officials need to know that all methodologically rigorous national and international studies found that the likelihood of false reports of sexual assault range between only 2-8%, making it *highly* statistically improbable that anyone would receive one, much less several, independent false claims of assault. Perhaps they need to know that research has consistently shown that untrained individuals can identify when someone is lying only about 50% of the time, without factoring in when one is dealing with a skilled predator. Perhaps then they wouldn't have been so quick to dismiss these girls and young women repeatedly, based on Larry's word.

Rather than chalking someone like Larry Nassar off as "virtually impossible to stop," tell your Trustees and officials that they should consider Van Dam's imperative that the first step to stopping a sex offender is "Be willing to consider the possibility that known and trusted adults sexually molest children." Perhaps then Dean Strampel wouldn't have immediately wished Larry Nassar

“good luck” when my police report was filed, or refrained from telling Larry he was “on your side” before hearing any of the evidence. Perhaps then Kathy Klages might have at least considered that an adult man penetrating two separate young gymnasts might not be as good as he appeared. Perhaps then, when Tiffany Thomas Lopez, or the athlete in 1999, or the woman in 2014 spoke up, someone might have considered it was more than female “misunderstanding”.

“Virtually impossible to stop”?

And let us not also forget that the brave young woman who has already testified against Larry Nassar in her own preliminary hearing for charges of abuse *not* related to Nassar’s medical practice, also disclosed her abuse when she was around 12 years old to an MSU physician. He also failed to report the allegations of abuse and instead invited Larry Nassar to meet with her parents to answer the charges himself.

“Virtually impossible to stop”?

You see President Simon, your words matter. Your words matter far beyond Larry Nassar and far beyond MSU. Because what you have just told your Trustees, your officials, your school, and the watching world, is that it ultimately doesn’t much matter what someone does. Ultimately, officials who are willfully indifferent to abusers in their midst can wash their hands and walk away, because men like Nassar are “virtually impossible to catch.”

Except that’s not true.

It has never been true.

But it does shift the blame. That makes it feel better, doesn’t it? Better, at least, for those who failed to protect the children. For those of us who were victims of this man, it’s a bitter reminder that our voices counted for nothing. And it makes every one of your condolences ring hollow.

President Simon, you had some very strong and very appropriate words for officials at Penn State who allowed an abuser like Jerry Sandusky to walk free. I had hoped that same commitment to protecting children would be present when it came to light that some of those same mistakes were made under your watch. Children don’t need more authority figures who absolve themselves by claiming that it is “virtually impossible” to prevent child abuse. They need leaders who have integrity and passion to defend them—no matter who the abuser, and no matter who the enabler.

Sincerely,

Rachael Denhollander