

Principal subject of probe // Monfredo on leave after assault claim

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The Worcester Police Department's sexual assault unit began its investigation of Belmont Street Community School Principal John F. Monfredo last week after the state Department of Social Services substantiated a "51-A" complaint of abuse against him. The complaint was then sent to the district attorney's office, which forwarded it to police.

The alleged victim, now 15, told DSS last month that she was raped by Monfredo three years ago when Monfredo brought a Little League team he coached to Belmont Street Community School for an indoor practice.

[Raymond V. Mariano] said his daughter played on a softball team coached by Monfredo in the Schwartz Little League. Monfredo has been coaching in that league for more than 20 years, from the time his own children began to play.

FULL TEXT

WORCESTER - A popular and respected local educator has been placed on administrative leave as police investigate allegations that he sexually assaulted a 12-year-old girl who played on a softball team he coached.

The Worcester Police Department's sexual assault unit began its investigation of Belmont Street Community School Principal John F. Monfredo last week after the state Department of Social Services substantiated a "51-A" complaint of abuse against him. The complaint was then sent to the district attorney's office, which forwarded it to police.

Monfredo said he is devastated by the allegations but confident police will dismiss the complaint, which alleges he assaulted the girl three years ago in a hallway at the school.

"This is a nightmare," Monfredo said yesterday in a telephone interview from his home. "All I've done my whole life is reach out to kids ... I feel sorry for this girl and my heart goes out to her family, but this is my life, my reputation. This just breaks my heart."

When DSS receives a complaint of abuse, it typically conducts an initial probe and determines whether to substantiate, or support, the allegations. The DSS threshold for evidence is much lower than that demanded by the courts, requiring only that there is "reason to believe" abuse may have occurred.

The alleged victim, now 15, told DSS last month that she was raped by Monfredo three years ago when Monfredo

brought a Little League team he coached to Belmont Street Community School for an indoor practice.

The girl was not identified. She made similar allegations last spring, but then refused to speak to DSS.

Monfredo was placed on paid leave, effective Monday, by School Superintendent James L. Garvey. Garvey declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation. District Attorney John J. Conte also declined to comment.

But word of the allegations brought strong support from friends and colleagues. Among them is Mayor Raymond V. Mariano, who is chairman of the School Committee. He has known Monfredo for almost 20 years.

"I personally have a great deal of confidence in John Monfredo," Mariano said. "Nothing I've heard would make me doubt his integrity. But any time a child makes an allegation, it indicates there's a problem somewhere. My heart goes out to her family because either way, there's a problem that has to be dealt with."

Mariano said his daughter played on a softball team coached by Monfredo in the Schwartz Little League. Monfredo has been coaching in that league for more than 20 years, from the time his own children began to play.

"John is someone I've trusted with my young daughter, and I continue to," Mariano said. "I don't think you'll find anyone anywhere who doesn't think kindly of John Monfredo. He's acknowledged as an outstanding principal by all quarters."

Considered a devoted and enthusiastic educator, the high-profile Monfredo has been honored several times for his offbeat but effective efforts to instill a love of reading in students. To turn pupils and parents on to books, he has flipped pancakes, flown in hot air balloons, ridden elephants and allowed himself to be dunked in water tanks.

In April, he received the 1996 Celebrate Literacy Award from the Massachusetts Reading Association. His school's Books and Beyond program was featured last year on television's Discovery Channel. Monfredo helped establish a crime watch group in the Belmont Street neighborhood. In 1991, he received the Thomas S. Green Public Service Award for outstanding service to the city.

Yesterday, Monfredo said he was never alone with the girl who made the complaint against him. He said he has hired lawyer James G. Reardon to represent him.

"This just destroys me," he said. "All my life I've worked to try and make Worcester a better place, and this one statement can just ruin your family and your life."

The police probe is headed by Lt. William O'Connor of the sexual assault unit, who would confirm only that an investigation began Jan. 3 as a result of the DSS action. He said he could not say when the probe would be completed.

DETAILS

People: Monfredo, John F Mariano, Raymond

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