

Principal welcomed back on job // Anguish still lingers from rape allegation

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The story of John Monfredo underscores the dilemma faced by those who deal with allegations of sexual abuse, especially when they involve a high-profile member of the community. For example, was it fair that the principal was placed on leave while police investigated him? Monfredo argued that it was not - that it was tantamount to judging him guilty.

Supporters of Monfredo were outraged that the newspaper printed the story when no charges had been filed. They believed Monfredo's reputation had been damaged unfairly, based on one girl's accusation. Advocates for the girl were upset that the newspaper used adjectives such as "respected and popular" to describe Monfredo, and that the article included information on his many accomplishments, along with words of support from Mayor Raymond V. Mariano. Many callers believed we had done an injustice to the girl and helped discourage other potential victims from coming forward.

FULL TEXT

John F. Monfredo walked through the doors of his beloved Belmont Street Community School yesterday for the first time in 14 weeks.

A steady stream of well-wishers flooded his office - parents, teachers and children delighted to have their principal back. Bouquets of flowers adorned his desk. Smiling pupils shyly tiptoed through Monfredo's door to offer crayon-scrawled cards of welcome.

"We missed you all the time you were gone," wrote 10-year-old Terrell Clark. "We are glad you are back. On Discovery I saw a wolverine. Miss Moynihan told us you were coming back so we all cheered. I went to the circus. Welcome back!"

It was an emotional homecoming, one that came 10 days after Superintendent James L. Garvey was notified that no charges would be filed against Monfredo in connection with a young girl's claim that he raped her three years ago in a school hallway.

'HEALING PROCESS' "It's been horrible being away from this school," said Monfredo, principal at Belmont for 11 years. "I'm just thrilled that it's over, but I'm going through a healing process right now. It doesn't take much to

bring tears to my eyes."

While Monfredo's return was heralded by parents and staff, it could hardly be considered triumphant. His teen-age accuser and her parents are reportedly devastated by the outcome of the police investigation, which concluded that there was insufficient evidence to bring charges against the principal. The girl's parents have declined to speak publicly. Police have said the investigation is inactive, but could be continued if more information becomes available.

Monfredo said he is confident that those who know him believe in his innocence. Yet he is aware that the speculation and whispers may cloud his future.

CAN'T WORRY

"This will be with me for the rest of my life," he said. "If there are any doubters, so be it. You can't worry about it ... I do feel that I've been cleared."

But the story of John Monfredo underscores the dilemma faced by those who deal with allegations of sexual abuse, especially when they involve a high-profile member of the community. For example, was it fair that the principal was placed on leave while police investigated him? Monfredo argued that it was not - that it was tantamount to judging him guilty.

"Constitutionally, it's telling people that you're guilty until you prove yourself innocent," he said. "The superintendent was very supportive, but he didn't have any choice. I really think the city needs to re-examine the process."

Placing Monfredo on leave triggered a newspaper story. And the depth of feeling sparked by the topic was evident when the article was published on Jan. 9.

NEWSPAPER STORY

Supporters of Monfredo were outraged that the newspaper printed the story when no charges had been filed. They believed Monfredo's reputation had been damaged unfairly, based on one girl's accusation. Advocates for the girl were upset that the newspaper used adjectives such as "respected and popular" to describe Monfredo, and that the article included information on his many accomplishments, along with words of support from Mayor Raymond V. Mariano. Many callers believed we had done an injustice to the girl and helped discourage other potential victims from coming forward.

But the troubling fact is this: Justice can be done to neither side unless the truth is known. And only two people in this case know the truth.

Monfredo himself called the newspaper story "a blessing in disguise." He kept a diary of his ordeal and wrote the following: "The days have been long and lonely, but the news article in a sense helped me cope, for the support that I have received from my colleagues, staff, friends, strangers and family has been outstanding. This support has helped me focus on the positive."

CARDS AND LETTERS

He said he received more than 600 cards and letters. Upon his return, he held a staff meeting to thank everyone for standing by him. Debra Miller, curriculum coordinator, said support for Monfredo at the school is overwhelming.

"Having him back is like a huge weight lifted off our shoulders," she said. Of the allegation, she said: "To us, it was like a personal affront. John has always been a symbol of integrity to our whole community ... How could he violate a child when he's always advocated just the opposite?"

While on leave, Monfredo said, he spent his days working out at the YMCA and sometimes sitting alone in a pew at St. George's Church, asking God how such a thing could happen to him. He said he prayed that his wife and two children would have the strength to endure the pain. Last week, he spent three days on Cape Cod with his wife, Annemarie, walking the beach and preparing for his return to work. "I'm probably in the best physical condition of my life," he said with a wry grin. "Mentally, I'm still not there yet. My nerves are a bit frayed."

A HUGGER

Yesterday, it was clear that Monfredo is a hugger. He threw his arms around parents and children alike, with an abandon he partly attributes to his Italian heritage.

But the allegations have tempered his physical nature and made him more cautious, he said. And while those who support his accuser say the outcome of this case will have a chilling effect on victims of sexual abuse, Monfredo said it serves as a grim warning that educators could face unfounded accusations.

"I find it sad," he said. "But I will never refuse a hug from a child, because they need it. I told my staff today, 'Life can be understood backwards, but you need to live your life moving forward.' That's what I intend to do. I need to move forward."

Illustration

PHOTO; Caption: Belmont Community School Principal John Monfredo is greeted by first-graders in the school's cafeteria.; Credit: PAUL CONNORS

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