

1/ 8/ 04

North County News

**"Putnam Valley family seeks justice
Parents speak out against middle school teacher"**

by Martin Wilbur

A 15-year-old Putnam Valley girl has outlined in graphic detail alleged sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a former teacher in a classroom nearly three years ago. In an explosive statement to police attached to a December 23 deposition, Laura Bliss accused veteran teacher Dennis Tave of forcing her to the floor of his Putnam Valley Middle School classroom before he opened his pants during an after-school visit while she was in the seventh grade. Tave asked the girl, who was 12 years old at the time, to stay after school because she missed an important test while recovering from Lyme Disease, according to the statement she gave to Putnam County Sheriff's Department investigators on May 20, two days after she told her parents of the alleged abuse.

The deposition was conducted one day before a motion was filed by her parents, Lynn and Peter Bliss, seeking permission from Putnam County Court Judge John Sweeny to file a late notice of claim. They hope the court will allow them to file a notice and launch a civil suit against Tave and the school district stemming from the February 2001 incident, even though the one-year-and-90-day statute of limitations to file has expired.

The family has urged their names be made public to encourage other families and staff members with information regarding Tave's behavior to step forward. Last weekend they constructed a web site, www.thechildfirst.com, so people may contact them and view some of the documents they gathered. Tave, 53 years old at the time of the alleged incident, was permanently removed from the classroom the day after his June 2 interrogation by Putnam County Sheriff's investigators.

After a four-month police inquiry, no criminal charges were filed against Tave by the District Attorney's office. By early autumn, the teacher and school officials reached an agreement following the district's own investigation that would pay him his full salary through June 30, 2004, while he remains out of the classroom. Tave, a Mahopac resident, is then scheduled to receive his full retirement package.

In the May 20 statement Laura Bliss gave to the Sheriff's Department, the teenager wrote that when she entered Tave's classroom alone about 3:30 p.m. on the day in question, he got up from his desk to give her a cup of water. After answering a multiple-choice question on the blackboard, Bliss stated she started feeling dizzy and nauseous. Tave then allegedly gave her a hug, wrapped his leg around her right leg and "kind of tripped me, causing me to fall to the ground."

While on her back, Bliss saw Tave unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants, her statement read. She then blacked out, awakening at about 4 p.m. "When I opened my eyes, I was still lying on my back, I looked down I saw (my) pants and underwear were pulled down to the middle of my thigh," the document said. Bliss then grabbed her belongings and went to the bathroom. She sat on the floor in the corner of the bathroom crying while her vagina was numb and bleeding, according to the records.

In the December 23 deposition, Bliss said shame and guilt prevented her from reaching out immediately after the alleged abuse. "I did not reveal what happened to me on or about February 5, 2001 to anyone, including my parents, because I felt so afraid, humiliated and depressed," she said. Documents obtained by the North County News written by two other middle school students, including a May 29, 2003, statement to the Sheriff's Department, also described Tave participating in inappropriate behavior. The May 29 statement to police stated the teacher allegedly wrapped his leg around and hugged another female student. A yearbook entry written by another girl to a friend expressed relief that she would no longer have Tave as a teacher because he often played with her hair and "was really scary."

In an interview Monday breaking his seven-month silence since his daughter spoke with authorities, Peter Bliss said he and his wife strongly suspected something had occurred within a few days of the incident. Her demeanor had changed and Lynn Bliss noticed Laura had discomfort and soreness in her private parts. They took their daughter to their pediatrician on February 12, 2001, where it was discovered she had a vaginal infection and inflammation. But it wasn't until after two years of therapy that telling comments and questions posed by their daughter began to emerge, culminating with her confiding in her therapist in May.

She remains in therapy twice a week. Other inappropriate behavior continued through March 2003, Bliss mentioned in her statement. Peter Bliss said he was angered by the "apparent bargain" struck between Tave and the school district without regard for his child, where the teacher was given the choice to retire or face 3020-A disciplinary hearings.

Most frustrating, Bliss said, is the district's failure to share information that could have been helpful in their quest for justice and to help other children who may have been victimized. He said the court action and the web site are intended to place the glare of the spotlight on the district. "They're turning their back on something here that's so much greater, so much bigger than whatever they consider their liability and this is what's killing us," said Bliss. "We have to file a civil suit just so that the community can be informed because if we didn't it would go away and that's what they were hoping."

Despite the behind-the-scenes legal wrangling, the anguished father praised the district's guidance counselors and school staff for helping his daughter throughout the ordeal. Bliss said the family expects some backlash to their public approach. Since May, Bliss said he has reached out to about 85 families of other students, most lending moral support. By stepping forward, the family has vowed to put a human face on a family seeking fairness, he said. "What kind of example do we set as parents, if we don't teach our daughter that if you're wronged, within the means available to you legally, to go out and right them?" Bliss continued. "How do you not do that?"

Attorney Thomas Scapoli, representing the Putnam Valley School District, declined to comment on Bliss's court motion or on the family's decision to make their plight public. The district must answer the motion by January 20, he said. Sweeny will make a decision whether to allow the motion sometime after the district's response. Superintendent Gary Tutty said this morning (Wednesday) that he was unable to respond to all questions regarding the court motion or the web site. Middle School Principal Edward Hallisey referred all questions to Tutty's office.

Attorney Victor Grossman, of Carmel, who represented Tave during the police investigation, said he has not seen any of the documents filed and could not comment on Bliss's motion. He said there was insufficient evidence to criminally charge his client last year.

Laura Bliss is now in the 10th grade and attending a private school, her father said. She was tutored at home during the final month of ninth grade. Since October 2002 she has battled anorexia nervosa, brought on by the trauma and anxiety of the incident, Peter Bliss said. At one point her weight fell to 85 pounds. "She's hit the 100 (pound) mark. She has a whole slew of friends, she's looking forward to the rest of her life and the big part of this is something that instead of facing her entire life and trying to hide it, it's going to be part of her life that she has to come to grips with and deal with," said Bliss. "But it will not sort of mark her for the rest of her life. It will damage all of her relationships, the way this obviously does, and that it will somehow find its place. We thank God that she's with us here now and that she didn't commit suicide, as a lot of (abused) girls do."

Two Putnam Valley community members who know both Tave and the family said they are torn because they do not believe the teacher was capable of the alleged actions, yet know that the girl is a responsible youngster. "I don't know what to believe at this point," said one person, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "You don't want to destroy someone's reputation but on the other hand you don't want a predator out there." Both describe the younger Bliss as a quiet, shy kid who has never been in trouble previously.

Social worker Judy Scheel, who has been treating Laura Bliss psychotherapeutically since the summer, revealed in her deposition to the court “with a reasonable degree of certainty” the onset of the eating disorder was in response to the sexual assault. “Unfortunately the development of anorexia nervosa in response to sexual abuse and the failure to report it at the time it occurred in the case of Laura Bliss is textbook,” Scheel stated. Peter Bliss said a dollar amount in a potential civil suit has not been discussed and will not be considered unless they win their motion. Monetary damages, however, are not a priority. “We’re seeking justice here,” he said. “When somebody is wronged you have lots of ways to deal with it. You either suffer in silence, accept it as though you’re a victim or you can empower yourself and say, ‘I’ve been empowered, it’s something I can empower myself to make right.’ “That’s what we’re doing,” Bliss continued. “Our anonymity, our silence, that’s not what we are as people.”