

Putnam County Judge Says Putnam Valley School Sexual Assault Case May Move Forward

by James Shearwood

Putnam County Judge John Sweeney ruled late last week that a Putnam Valley family may bring a late notice of claim against the Putnam Valley School District for a sexual assault that allegedly occurred in February 2001.

In his ruling, Judge Sweeney stated: "Whether the Plaintiffs can prove their case is not the issue before this Court. What is before this Court is whether Plaintiffs have established . . . the right to present it.

Although claims must usually be filed within 90 days of the occurrence, Judge Sweeney ruled that "there was a reasonable excuse for the infant Plaintiff not to have disclosed this earlier" and further, "there is no prejudice to the school" in the late filing.

As reported previously, the daughter of Peter and Lynn Bliss reported to them in May of 2003 that her social studies teacher Dennis Tave had attacked her two years earlier after school.

Judge Sweeney's ruling states: "The infant Plaintiff's Affidavit strikes this Court as honest and sincere in that the trauma of this event was so overwhelming as to preclude her from coming forward sooner.

Anyone with a cursory knowledge of the problem of sexual abuse is aware of the volumes of studies that have shown that young victims . . . (Plaintiff was 12 at the time) are often reticent to come forward either because of shame, guilt or myriad other factors."

When Laura Bliss reported the alleged attack last spring, the School District and the Sheriff's Department began an investigation, but no charges were filed.

Tave, 53 at the time of the alleged incident, has denied any wrongdoing. He resigned from the Putnam Valley School District prior to the completion of the investigation.

The Bliss family issued a statement after the Judge's ruling saying: "We intend to exercise our full rights of discovery to all of the school records withheld from us. We now have the right to question individuals who have information important to uncovering the truth."

In an earlier interview Peter Bliss said a monetary figure had never been mentioned and the family's interest in bringing the suit was to get at the information the school district may have acquired in its preliminary investigation.

Putnam Valley School Superintendent Gary Tutty said the Judge's ruling is "pretty normal" in these situations and the District is waiting to see what will happen next.

"It's a sad situation for all concerned," said Tutty.