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In sex abuse case, two sisters say they were pressured to see sports doctor

By KATE WELLS • MAR 8, 2017



Katie Payne lives in California now. She and her sister, Maureen Payne Baum, grew up in the Detroit area.

Their mom still lives there. And a few months ago, their mom was driving to work, listening to news on the radio, when a story came on. A US Olympic gymnastics and Michigan State University sports doctor was being accused of sexual abuse.

It was just 4 a.m. in California. But Payne's mom called her anyway.

"Yeah, she woke me up and told me," Payne says. "She was like, 'Isn't that the doctor that you and Moo saw?'"

Moo, their family nickname for Maureen, and Katie were both competitive gymnasts when they were around 12 and 14.

It was grueling, 30-hours-a-week training, they say. There was no off season. They were chronically injured, usually in pain, and their mom wanted them to get the best possible care.

At the time, that meant Dr. Larry Nassar.

Sisters talk about pressure from coaches to see Nassar

After she got off the phone with her mom, Katie Payne started googling around and reading the news stories about Nassar.

"You know, I wasn't shocked," she says. "I figured there were other people. Because this was this thing he was passing off as a medical treatment. [I was] horrified, of course, as the numbers grew. I guess I just knew I wasn't alone."

Both Payne and her sister say they were among the more than 40 women and girls who were allegedly abused by Nassar.

In their lawsuits against him, they say Nassar told them he was treating them for lower back pain. As part of those “treatments,” he would penetrate them with his fingers, repeatedly, without their consent.

During one appointment, their father was in the room with Maureen when “Nassar purposefully blocked his view and sexually assaulted [Maureen] for a short period before conducting feigned ‘traditional’ treatments,” according to the lawsuits filed by Detroit firm Mckeen & Associates on their behalf.

When you hear the same stories like this, spanning decades, from dozens of women, it’s hard to wrap your mind around how this stayed quiet for so long. But Katie Payne says, you have to understand: their lives were sheltered, and they mostly revolved around gymnastics. Coaches were always telling them what they were doing wasn’t good enough.

And then here’s this incredible Olympic gymnastics doctor that you’re lucky enough to live near, she says. “And there was tons of pressure from our coaches to see him,” Payne says. “I saw another doctor like when

I was 13 or 12 for a back problem. And I remember our coaches were like, didn't want to believe anything this doctor said. It was like they would only believe what Larry Nassar said."

Police: victims say Nassar was "like a god to the gymnasts"

The gym where the sisters trained is closed now. Two of their former coaches are still working in Michigan, and we reached out to them to get their perspective the Payne sisters' recollections.

They didn't respond.

But one gymnastics coach we did reach, who did not train either sister and asked that neither her name nor her gym's name be used, said that before the abuse came out, Larry Nassar really was the only doctor you'd want your gymnast to see.

"Medically, that's true," she says. "He was the best. What you have to understand is there was nobody who could treat them the way he could. I had several gymnasts go see him, none of them had any problems. Their parents went with them. He sent them back with great physical therapy they could do in the gym."

In one police affidavit, Michigan State University

Detective Sergeant Andrea Munford says one 16-year-old victim would talk about Nassar with other gymnasts. “They would discuss how he was ‘touchy.’ At the time, [she] did not question Nassar because he was doing the same thing to other gymnasts she knew.”

Munford says another woman, now 21, claims she was sexually assaulted by Nassar beginning around age 10 or 11.

“[She] stated that as a competitive gymnast, you would do anything to get yourself better and that the coaches were always pressuring them to get better. She said it was like you were always in trouble if you were hurt. At the time, she thought she had to submit to their treatment to get better and never told her parents because she had to get better...he was like a god to the gymnasts.”

Victims who speak up are “cogs in a machine focused on performance excellence”

Professor Gretchen Kerr, a Vice Dean in the department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, has spent years studying athletes who are abused, especially gymnasts. She says they’re gradually groomed to accept even abusive behavior as normal. And if they do say something to an adult, they may not be believed. Kerr

says these young athletes become cogs in a larger machine. "A machine that's focused on performance excellence. And to get that performance excellence, you need a team of young gymnasts who are compliant, all following orders, not disrupting the system in any particular way."



Professor Gretchen Kerr has spent years studying abuse of young athletes
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A handful of women say they did tell their coach or trainers at Michigan State University about Nassar's treatment.

But they claim their concerns were brushed off or, in the case of a 2014 MSU investigation, that they misunderstood Nassar's legitimate medical treatments.

"There's an interesting concept called 'willful blindness' that applies to situations like this," Kerr says. "In which people have information on which they should act, but they choose not to. It's easier to say, for example, these young girls must be confused, must not have the details right, than it is to accept what's happening to them."

Katie Payne and Maureen Payne Baum (who were not at MSU) made the call to put their names out there, publicly and to talk about this as a family. For Payne Baum, part of that decision was having a baby girl this year.

"And I know now what my mom is going through. The feelings she has, knowing that she sent us to him," she says. "You know me having children myself, it's hit a little bit closer to home to me."

Michigan State University has hired an outside legal team, led by former federal prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, to conduct "the factual review necessary to address the allegations being made and to assess

Nassar's former work at the University, including his work with MSU Athletics, the school's Board of Trustees said in a statement last month.

MSU police say they've received 80 complaints about Nassar. He is facing multiple criminal charges at both the state and federal level.

And more than 40 women and girls have filed lawsuits against both Nassar and the university.