

Montgomery County Civic Federation – Community Hero Award

Jennifer Alvaro

12/11/17

Somewhere in the county is a woman who knows her former music teacher, the man who sexually abused her in a MCPS classroom, sits in jail with her name on his arm.

- This woman, who was then a young girl in elementary school, was preyed upon by a man she was told to trust. Besides living every day with the knowledge this man has her name tattooed on his arm, she also wonders if people who meet her have seen her before, on line, in the images of child sexual abuse her music teacher, Lawrence Joynes, distributed to the world.

This could have been prevented.

- MCPS officials knew for years this man was preying on children. According to court documents, school system personnel records showed prior to this woman being victimized, Joynes's principal in 2011 placed him under restrictions, saying that he could not touch or be alone with students and that he had to leave his classroom door open during instruction, stay off the playground during recess and refrain from sitting with students in the cafeteria. He was teacher at 11 schools over his lengthy county career; after his sentencing, the state's attorney commented, "This man is a predator; he's been a predator for decades...noting that Joynes victimized "at least 15 children that we're aware of. I think that's a disgrace."

Somewhere in the county are numerous young men who know they are one of many young men who were sexually abused when they were small boys by their elementary school teacher.

- 23 years of working with victims and offenders make me confident of the following. Many of these men have for years struggled with heartbreak and uncertainty. They question themselves, am I gay? They ask themselves, should I have fought back? They tell themselves, I should have told. They worry, are there pictures? They fear, is it my fault there are more victims?

This could have been prevented.

- For 17 years, elementary school teacher Daniel Picca was warned and reprimanded by Montgomery County Public Schools over his "inappropriate" conduct with male students. Time and again, Picca was told to stop touching boys, massaging their shoulders and feeling their biceps; to stop asking them to take off their shirts and flex their muscles and to sit on his lap; to stop meeting privately with students. Transferred from school to school continued this behavior, receiving no less than seven "clear and unequivocal written warnings" from principals of three schools and two superintendents over the years, according to the findings of the Maryland State Board of Education.
- In 2012, the state board described the events in the Picca case as "shocking." "From the first complaint in in October 1993, 17 years passed with patterns repeated and reprimands issued.

Yet this teacher was transferred to different elementary schools and remained in the classroom. That should never have occurred.”

Somewhere in the county is a teen girl who dreads going to high school. She has been shamed and vilified.

- She did what generations of teen girls have done. She went to school. She made friends. She trusted the adults who were paid to protect her. She was sexually abused by the head of security in her high school. After his arrest, he abused her again while out on bail.

This could have been prevented.

- After his arrest, MCPS admitted they their background checks missed a 1994 criminal case against Yantos. He was charged with pulling a gun on a waitress at a topless bar while working as an NYPD officer. He never should have been hired.
- Worse, with this victim, it came out at in court, his interactions with the victim caught the attention of school officials. In fact, he received several write-ups for “the inappropriate close contact that he had with the victim at the school leading up to these events”. He was left in the school with access to the victim.

I am here tonight due to another case which could have been prevented. The John Vigna case which you succinctly and accurately documented in your October 2017 newsletter. I will not repeat the information to you, except to tell you in that case, somewhere in the county is a young girl, now in middle school who worries each time a car drives by her house. Worries because Mr. Vigna told her he drives by to see if she is home, and when he doesn't see her car he feels sad as she is far from him. She most likely wonders now, who is driving by to look for me..... This could have been prevented.

I began this long journey naively thinking the county would care about the voiceless, the defenseless, the victims. I'm not so naïve anymore. I have learned what the Civic Federation has known for decades, that in many cases, the county dissembles, contorts, and covers up the truth to protect itself. Documents are created to retroactively justify bad policy. Half-truths, manipulations and playing cat & mouse with truth seekers is the norm. And who suffers? Those who are too young to advocate for themselves. Seven year olds don't have twitter accounts, they cannot join the #metoo movement. Instead, by the silence and complicity of the adults in our community, these children are by default, unwilling members of the clubs no one wants to join. The club of #lookawayanddenytheobvious and #tooyoungtospeakout. The club of #nothingtoseehere, #letskeepitmoving. The club of #buisnessasusualinMCPS In other words, the club of #sacrificethechildrentoprotecttheadults

The cases I described here are just a few of many. I can document many, many more. The issues are current and ongoing. The county will tell you they have made changes. The county will assure you they are doing everything right. The county will try and persuade you there in nothing left to be done. I can prove to you this is far, far from the truth. While some of the offenders have been held accountable, no one, not one person, among the many who broke to law to leave them in the classrooms has had any consequence at all. The man in the superintendent's office who ran the illegal database with the names of over 220 people they suspected of abusing children, no consequence. Principals and superintendents who knew? No consequence. Both cases mentioned tonight, Vigna and Yantos, prove, even with the

county's new response, the county is not and has not done enough. These issues are current and ongoing. The triathlon is not even one third of the way done. Despair is ever present and yet, hope is present too. In fact, hope and confidence will win the day.

Everywhere in the country women and men are finding their voice with the #metoo movement.

- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences revoked icon Harvey Weinstein's membership. The Today show fired Matt Lauer. Al Franken has resigned from the Senate. How did this sea change occur? Adults used their voices and spoke out AND incredibly, finally, adults in positions of leadership used their ears and heard them. Those adults, victims and listeners, acted together as one and change is occurring. Amazing.

Somewhere in Montgomery County, a few astute people, you, are listening to that national conversation and more importantly, paying attention to local issues.

- The children of Montgomery county cannot speak out for themselves and this silence is what has allowed this travesty to not only occur but get worse and worse and worse. It has allowed a festering culture of complacency and cover up to take root and thrive. It has condoned and enabled the abuse of children by silence and duplicity.
- By passing this resolution tonight, telling the county to implement three critical steps, to Disclose, Post and Inform our community on this issue, you have become the voice of dozens and dozens and dozens of our children, some now adults, the voice that starts, for Montgomery county the movements of #wespeakforthem #nomorenothere, the voice that says sacrificing children for the comfort and protection of adults is not going to happen on our watch. The movements of #notanymore #notonemore #enoughisenough The movement of #thereisnograyarea #fightforwhatisrightnotwhatiscvientent

Augustine of Hippo once said, "Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it."

- Here in this room, by giving me this award, but much more importantly, by passing this resolution, you, the civic federation will do right even when our county does wrong.
- By passing this resolution you are saying to the voiceless children of our county, "I hear you, I believe you, I will fight for you." You are saying to those in power, "I hear your silence. I see your excuses. I will hold you accountable".

And for that, I thank you.