

KHS alumni share stories of sexual abuse

Molly Higgins, print editor

The Kirkwood High School Alumni Facebook group exploded with shares, comments and outrage. Katie Pappageorge, 1999 KHS graduate, began the conversation on July 7 by sharing a haunting story – her experience as a victim of sexual abuse by a former KHS teacher, who will remain unnamed as they have not been criminally charged. The group was suddenly filled with previously silenced victims and witnesses, coming forward to share their own stories or lend support.

In Pappageorge's original post, she wrote about her experience with one particular teacher. She detailed how the teacher would meet with her privately, masking the inappropriate nature of the relationship as mentoring or extra time to go over classwork.

"A lot of [his] behavior did not strike me as abnormal at the time," Pappageorge said. "But something about it was odd. He'd give me a pass during pep rallies so I could meet him at [his class]room because no one was around at school. I was his teaching assistant during his free period. He locked the office. He'd take me to his house."

According to Pappageorge, the abuse escalated over time. She skipped two grades, and was just 14 when the sexual exploitation began.

"We'd developed this personal relationship," Pappageorge said. "It moved from grooming to actual [sexual abuse]. At one point I became afraid that I was pregnant."

Pappageorge was not alone in her experience. Jill Wilson, 1996 KHS graduate, came forward to share her own story of sexual abuse by the same teacher.

"He was always very flirty," Wilson said. "Things that were seemingly, as a high school student, innocuous, but as an adult I look back and I can see all of those behaviors as grooming. There was one time we went [on a field trip]. He sat next to me at this table, and he leaned over and said, 'I've had an erection all night since you're sitting next to me.'"

Both Wilson and Pappageorge had an important aspect of their personal life in common. Each had strained or abusive relationships with male authority figures, which Wilson said their teacher used to his advantage in manipulating his victims. According to AbuseWatch, this is a common tactic of predators, as they use a victim's neglect as an opportunity for connection.

"All of us [victims] had strained relationships at home. He would come in and fill that void," Wilson said. "It was almost like he would become a counselor, ingratiate himself to us and build confidence and trust and relationship."



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Katie Pappageorge, 1999 KHS graduate, began the conversation on July 7 by sharing a haunting story – her experience as a victim of sexual abuse by a former KHS teacher.

For Wilson and Pappageorge, among other victims, the abuse went on for years. At one point after graduating, Wilson was contacted by a KHS sophomore, who told her the same teacher was being inappropriate with her. Wilson said this was what finally motivated her to take action.

"I was never willing to stand up to him for myself," Wilson said. "But once it was someone else that was at stake that I cared about, then I [thought] 'OK, I'm going to go tell [Franklin] McCallie, [former KHS principal]. Somebody has to do this.'"

Wilson brought evidence of her own abuse as well as that of several other students to McCallie. Later, the teacher was asked to resign and lost his teaching license for grades K-12. Pappageorge said for her, the resignation came as a shock. She said she did not understand what could have possibly caused his departure from KHS.

"I didn't even connect [the resignation] with what happened with me," Pappageorge said. "At the time, I didn't consider it inappropriate. I didn't think of myself as a victim, I thought he was my mentor. I thought I was in love with him. I thought he had changed my life. And I was devastated."

The teacher was no longer employed by KSD, but Pappageorge said she did not feel a sense of closure upon his resignation. She said she felt the issue was treated as hushed rumors rather than a crime.

"It was very strange. If people talked about it at all, [they'd say] 'he was involved with a student. There was an affair.' There was not any implication that a crime had been committed," Pappageorge said. "I think that had to do with the school's liability. I think him resigning rather than [being] fired had to do with that."

Similarly to Pappageorge, Wilson said the issue did not seem to be resolved. Although the victims have a case still in progress with the Kirkwood Police Department, she expressed a lack of closure or restorative action by the school district themselves.

"[McCallie] never called," Wilson said. "Nobody ever asked me if I needed help or counseling services, or said sorry. It just was done."

Several attempts to contact McCallie for comment were left unreturned.

"It is possible that [Kirkwood] could have led the way in St. Louis County to place a much greater emphasis on sexual abuse," McCallie wrote in a statement in the alumni Facebook group. "I regret I did not do more."

Pappageorge and Wilson are not alone in their experience. According to a survey conducted by the American Association of University Women in 2000, 8 out of 10 students experience sexual harassment in school, 38% of which were harassed by teachers or school employees.

"I believe that procedures at Kirkwood have changed. I believe that there are more ways of combating abuse, more ways of addressing this early on," Pappageorge said. "But I also know that looking at the alumni page, the messages that I've gotten, I think this kind of thing still happens. So I would like to see the culture at the school really shift. I don't think we've done enough."

After the initial posts, members of the community urged KSD to respond with action. Current Kirkwood administration came forward with proposals for both remedial and preventative measures to address sexual abuse in schools.

In an email statement on July 13, Kirkwood Superintendent Dr. David Ulrich announced that he will request approval for "an independent assessment and investigation of the culture and climate within our schools and the district related to the reporting and handling of allegations of sexual abuse, misconduct and inappropriate behavior."

"[We're bringing the] independent evaluator in to go through all of our processes, policies [and] procedures," said Matt Bailey, assistant superintendent of special services. "[We're] saying 'help us be better. Help us correct any areas that need corrected [and] improve areas that need to be improved.'"

The project aims to “identify and investigate whether there have been previously unreported incidents or failures” and “take prompt and appropriate action in response to complaints and determine if students, staff, and parents have confidence in reporting and know to whom and how to report an incident.” A recommendation will be made at a school board meeting Aug. 31 for review and approval.

“We want to make sure that [we raise] awareness about these issues and that people feel safe and comfortable coming forward and sharing these allegations,” said Dr. Shonda Ambers-Phillips, executive director of student services. “[We’re] reduc[ing] the stigma that’s associated with sexual violence and sexual assault, and making sure that we are making this information known. Every opportunity to educate people and raise awareness on this topic is necessary.”

In the meantime, KSD asks anyone who has information in relation to abuse or inappropriate behavior by any current or former KSD staff member to fill out an online form, call 314.213.6100, ext. 7804, or email Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Dr. Howard Fields at howard.fields@kirkwoodschools.org. Anyone with information should also contact the Kirkwood Police Department. KSD is also offering counseling services to survivors through the online form.

“[If I could say something to my younger self], I would say that it’s not your fault,” Pappageorge said. “No matter how complicit you feel in it, no matter how much you love them, how much you feel like you chose this. A teacher is an authority figure, a teacher is a person in a position of power. It’s a profound abuse of their power.”

Pappageorge said she feels that shame is one of the things holding victims back from coming forward with their stories, yet it is not the only factor. She said fear that the victim will not be supported is one of the most important reasons cases of abuse are so often left in the dark, and urges members of the community to promote change.

“You must believe survivors,” Pappageorge said. “You must fully support them when they come forward, you must hear their stories and not push it away out of discomfort. That needs to change, and I hope it is changing.”