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Victim of cop sex abuse speaks out after the verdict

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By Danielle Camilli Staff writer |

The trial is over. Guilty verdicts have been rendered. Her abusers are behind bars.

But the nightmares continue.

"It's every night. They just keep coming. I just keep seeing them two faces. After all these years, it still gets to me," said the 24-year-old woman, who was repeatedly sexually assaulted as a teenager by a woman whom she considered family and by the woman's police-officer boyfriend in Moorestown.

Two of the assaults were videotaped by the defendants and played for the jury during their three-week Superior Court trial last month. The graphic videos, some of the most damaging evidence in the case, proved gut-wrenching to watch as the blindfolded and bound teen lay incapacitated like a "ragdoll" as she was assaulted with various objects.

Former Patrolman Robert Melia Jr., 42, of Moorestown, and Heather Lewis, 36, of Pemberton Township, were convicted April 27 of multiple counts of aggravated sexual assault and other sex crimes for abusing the woman and her younger sister over several years.

Lewis also was convicted for the sexual assault of a teenage boy. That assault occurred during Melia's eight-year tenure with the Moorestown Police Department. He was also convicted of official misconduct.

The former couple are in county custody awaiting sentencing in September. The Burlington County Prosecutor's Office is expected to argue for terms of 50-plus years for each.

"I was so relieved and happy," the woman said when she learned of the verdicts. "I know they will now pay for what they did."

But she said the years of abuse, which she testified began when she was in eighth grade, and the recent trial have left her shaken.

"I don't remember all of it, but having to think about it and talk about it at trial was really, really hard," she said. "I didn't want to talk about it, but I knew I had to so the truth would come out. Now I can't make it go away."

She said in recent weeks she has been plagued by nightmares and fear. She will start therapy soon to help her deal with the aftereffects.

"It still bothers me, and I still have a lot of trust issues, especially trusting men and cops," said the woman, a mother of three.

Adding to her pain is the video evidence that was so critical to the state's case. The victim testified that she believed she was about 15 or 16 in the videos, but couldn't be sure because she had no recollection of the events.

In the video, the teenager looks incapacitated and physically helpless as Lewis assaults her with various objects while Melia records the proceedings. Despite the assaults, the teenager lay nearly motionless, showing little to no response, throughout the 45 minutes of recording.

As jurors watched the footage, they were visibly upset and angry, some looking at the defendants with disbelief and disgust.

"I still haven't watched the video. I can't," the woman said after the trial. "I read about it. Well, I tried to read about it in the newspaper, but it made me cry and I had to stop. I'm really angry and mad that they did that to me. I didn't even know the video was out there until the detectives told me. It's disgusting."

Burlington County Assistant Prosecutor Kevin Morgan told the jury that the tapes, which were found during a search of Melia's computer files after his and Lewis' arrests in 2008, depicted "downright depravity."

"The video has been the worst part, having to look at some of those pictures," the woman said. "Before, I just put it way back far in my mind and didn't think about what they did. But now I just can't."

The defense argued that the victim was 18 and a willing participant in the bondage sex tape, and that Melia did not shoot the video, even though it was recorded on his bed with his video camera, and with the presence of a male arm in one shot. The footage was stored on his external hard drive.

The victim said at trial and again last week that she never had a consensual relationship with either Melia or Lewis.

"I still don't know why they did this stuff to me and to the other girls," she said. "I don't know."

The defense also contended that the woman, her sister and two other victims in the case falsely accused the defendants to cover up the sexual abuse of one of the girls by her own stepfather. The jury was hung and could not reach a verdict on the counts pertaining to that victim.

"They tried to make me out to be a bad person, saying we got together and came up with all this. But that never happened. We didn't even know about all that stuff with her stepdad," the woman said, sounding hurt and confused by the accusation. "They also said I stole from Rob and lived with them, and it just wasn't true."

The defense wondered why the victim didn't report the sexual abuse sooner. When police questioned her in 2008, she initially denied the assaults happened. She later told police how Melia woke her in the middle of the night during sleepovers to rape her and how at times Lewis helped in the abuse.

"I didn't have anybody to tell, and he was a cop. I was scared," said the victim, a former Pemberton Township resident who with her sister described for the jury a difficult childhood that included dropping out of high school and living with different relatives.

She said she enjoyed her time at the defendants' home in Moorestown as an escape from her troubles.

"They were buying me all this stuff and making sure I had something to eat, and I would get to see (Lewis' son). And I knew I wouldn't be able to see him anymore if I told," she said.

As an adult and a mother herself, she wishes she came forward sooner.

"I would tell someone going through it to tell somebody," the victim said. "It will make them feel a lot better."

The victim said she is unsure if she will attend Melia and Lewis' sentencing in September.

"They have to pay for what they did," she said. "I just hope I can move on now, but the nightmares just won't stop."

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