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Teen sexual battery victim reflects on coming forward

- Joan Ryan
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Martine Savage is talking to me on her cell phone. She never imagined herself moving out of state in the middle of her senior year at San Rafael High School. She left behind her role as Abigail in "The Crucible," her spot on the school soccer team, her part-time job at a beauty salon, her friends. She won't be attending her prom or her graduation.

"I know I'd get booed," she says of graduation.

The school resource officer from the San Rafael Police Department tried to assure her he'd eject anyone who booed. "But I'll still have heard it," she says. "I'll know everybody's hating me as I'm walking across the stage."

Savage accused three classmates at San Rafael High of sexually assaulting her after a house party in Novato on Jan. 15. One was on the baseball team. One on the basketball team. All three were in the popular crowd. Savage wasn't. She is the kind of girl who gets good grades and dresses a little eccentrically and can be abrupt when she's annoyed. She went to parties on the weekends with her friends, had a couple of boyfriends over the years, and had planned to go to beauty school instead of college, at least for a couple of years.

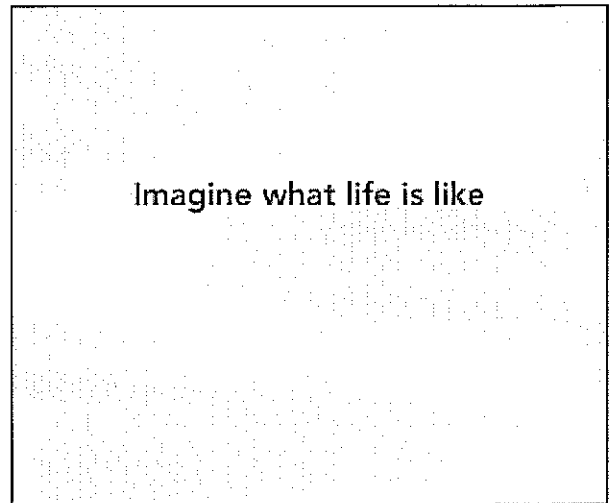
"I've known her for years through sports," says police officer Harry Barbier, who for 10 years has patrolled San Rafael's school campuses. "She's a very credible young lady. Intelligent. Has her feet on the ground."

No matter.

After word spread across campus that she went to the police, she became an outcast. She was a liar, a slut, a wannabe. She was hounded by classmates, threatened and harassed and ostracized, blamed for ruining the lives of three well-liked boys. She is talking to me because she says people ought to know what happens to girls who tell. They should know why so few come forward. What good does it do? You end up being hated and leaving school, and the boys stick around, popular as ever, making you sound like a pathetic nut case looking for revenge or attention or who knows what. Even Savage's parents got the cold shoulder from other parents.

"The whole thing is wrong," said Savage's father, Stan, a Smith Barney stockbroker. "The whole juvenile justice system is wrong."

The boys spent more than 50 days at Marin County's juvenile hall awaiting trial. In the midst of the trial, after Savage testified for six hours against them, they agreed to a plea. Two of the boys pled to felony sexual battery, the third to a misdemeanor of aiding and abetting sexual battery. Their pleas got them released from juvenile hall. Within hours of their release on April 1, they showed up on the high school campus. They continue to show up periodically on campus to pick up assignments for their independent study programs.



Four days after the boys' release, fearing for her safety after hearing rumors of retaliation, Savage left school for good. She is now living with an old college friend of her mother, finishing up courses in advanced-placement English and government.

"I feel as though I've lost," she says. The boys' dispositions -- the juvenile equivalent of sentences -- are scheduled for later this month. They are likely to be given probation, counseling and possibly house arrest.

"I feel as if the message this sends to other girls who have been raped is, 'Don't stand up for yourself. People are going to hate you, and it won't do any good anyway because the boys are going to go free,'" says Savage, who recently turned 18. "The girls get cast out, and boys get their wrists slapped. "

The assault occurred at a party that was like so many high school parties. The parents at the Novato house weren't home. There was lots of alcohol, about 40 kids, all seniors at San Rafael High. Savage remembers drinking three beers. She believes now that her third beer was spiked with a date-rape drug. While still at the house, she began to feel "really out of it." She lost strength in her arms. She had a hard time focusing on what people were saying.

"I felt like a blob," she says. Two of the boys, whom she knew from school, escorted her to an SUV and got into the back seat with her and the car took off, driven by the third boy. It all happened so fast. "I thought, 'Where am I going?' " Savage remembers.

They pulled into the parking lot of Denny's in Corte Madera. As Savage faded in and out of full consciousness, the boys assaulted her in the backseat.

"I kept saying no, stop, but it was as if I wasn't there," she says, "as if they didn't hear me."

At the urging of a friend, she called a rape crisis hot line the next morning. But she didn't go to a hospital, a decision she came to regret. Two days after the assault, she told her father, who urged her to tell the police. "But I didn't want to go up against these boys," she says. "I didn't want to have to go through all that."

When she showed up at school, the rumors were already raging. She had asked for it. She was lying. She confronted the two boys who had assaulted her, asking how they could have done what they did. She says she got a drunken, raucous call from the boys on her answering machine. A week after the assault, she decided to go to the police.

The deputy district attorney who prosecuted the case declined to comment because the defendants are juveniles. And when defendants are juveniles, the schools cannot reveal them to parents in the school community; they cannot alert them that sex offenders might be sitting next to their daughters in class. Administrators for the San Rafael and Marin County school districts could not be reached; the schools are closed for spring break.

Barbier, the school resource officer, says he understands Savage's frustration and anger over how everything turned out. "This happens way more than people know," Barbier says of sexual assaults at unsupervised parties. "Girls drink too much or are drugged, and they worry about reporting it because of how they're going to be perceived. Victims are afraid of the ridicule they're going to get from other kids. And they don't want their parents to know."

Savage expects many classmates and parents at San Rafael High will be angry that she is talking publicly about what happened to her. Some people still think she made it all up, even though the boys pleaded guilty. But she wants people to know that sometimes the assault is only the beginning of the humiliation.

Sometimes the assault is only the first blow in a long beating.

"I would really like to have finished at my own school in my last year," Savage says. "I would really like to have stayed with my friends, maybe even go to the prom. That would have been nice.

"But it's strengthening to at least fight."

Going public is the only weapon someone like Savage has. If the hands of the law and the hands of the school are somewhat tied because defendants are juveniles, maybe there is some good in people like Savage heaping on their attackers some of the public shame and scorn they heaped on their victims. Maybe they'll learn, at least a little, what it's like for girls who tell.

Joan Ryan's column runs Thursday and Sunday. E-mail her at joanryan@sfchronicle.com.

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