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METROPOLITAN DESK

Our Towns; As Duke Accusation Festers, Disbelief Grows

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Morristown, N.J. - PATRICIA CRAPO has been teaching religion and writing college recommendations for a quarter century, but only once did she allow herself to put so much of her heart on the page.

"If I had a son, I would hope he could be like Reade," Mrs. Crapo wrote three years ago on behalf of a student applying to Duke. "I have been teaching at the high school level for 24 years, and I have never said or written that about another student."

The letter, written about a student, Reade Seligmann, whom she taught for four years at the Roman Catholic Delbarton School here, still rings completely true to her.

But that letter can sum up the jarring disparity that characterizes Reade Seligmann's life now. On the one hand is the person his acquaintances know. On the other is his role as one of three white Duke lacrosse players accused of raping a black woman hired to dance at an off-campus party. The case has inspired endless jeremiads on race, gender and class despite growing questions about whether the accusations are true.

On the surface, the most obvious disparity is that records, photographs and eyewitnesses' accounts from his cellphone, a taxi driver, an A.T.M. and his electronic dorm entry card seem to show that he was either on the phone or far from the party virtually the entire time the attack is said to have occurred. (Lawyers for both the other accused players say they have compelling alibis and have passed polygraph tests claiming their innocence.)

But to teachers, coaches and monks at Delbarton, to his neighbors in Essex Fells, N.J., and to his friends at Duke, the disparity between the indictment and these circumstances is not the biggest absurdity. Instead, it's that he is part of this story at all.

Father Luke Travers, the Benedictine monk who is Delbarton's headmaster, and Katie Fisher, a recent Duke graduate, have little in common except for making the same point in similar words. When they heard he had been identified as one of the suspects, the whole story began to lose any credibility.

"Before anyone was charged, rumors were flying all over campus, but no one ever guessed for one second she could name Reade," said Ms. Fisher, referring to the accuser. "And when I heard it was Reade, I knew 100 percent in my heart this was a completely false allegation."

Full disclosure: I graduated from Duke long ago and have a son there now. And I'm slightly involved in alumni affairs through a board, composed mostly of journalists who are Duke graduates, which meets twice a year to advise the alumni magazine.

But you don't need ties to Duke to look at details that have emerged about the case -- the accuser's history of past accusations and differing accounts of the crime, a lack of DNA evidence, a police lineup of only Duke lacrosse players, a second dancer's original statement saying no rape could have occurred -- and come away queasy.

Maybe he and the others are the monstrous incarnation of white, male privilege, or maybe this has become a cautionary tale of a rush to judgment before facts were known, of a toxic brew of politics and race in the middle of an election for district attorney.

Reade Seligmann, a barrel-chested high school All-American and top student, was recruited by nearly every top university in the country, including all the Ivies, to play lacrosse or football.

His nickname on the team at Duke was "Frazzle" because he worried so much about getting anything wrong: a dropped pass, any kind of misbehavior. He was viewed as the team's resident Nervous Nellie. The family joke is that he worries for two weeks if he feels he didn't give someone a good enough handshake. "He was a person of definite goals, but especially of values," said Abbot Giles Hayes, the monk who oversees Delbarton. "Sixteen- and 17-year-olds aren't finished yet, but Reade acted finished. He acted like he was 37 or 47."

HE was an honor student at Duke and a member of the Atlantic Coast Conference academic honors team. He chose to live in a separate part of his dorm from most of his teammates, not because he disapproved of them (he doesn't), but because he didn't want social pressures to impinge on academic ones. He told friends that he attended the infamous party reluctantly, felt uncomfortable with the dancing and soon left.

There's not enough space for all his character references, but at Duke you could start with Yani Newton, the only black member of the women's lacrosse team, who had a regular breakfast date with Mr. Seligmann before an 8:30 class, and who knew he was the only white student in his African-American studies class. Asked if he had ever given indications of being racist, she said: "Oh my God, absolutely no, a resounding no. The idea is just laughable."

Is Reade Seligmann a saint? Not many of us are. Some kids at that party behaved like jackasses, and there are certainly cases where good kids do unspeakably stupid things -- particularly when alcohol is involved. It's possible to be convinced that Reade Seligmann did nothing, and it's another thing to be certain that no one did.

But it's easier to spin the narrative of race, class and privilege when it's not attached to a real person, something true for all three. So Mrs. Crapo has dug out an old picture she took of her former student in class and put it on her dresser at home to blot out the pictures from mug shots and courtrooms, the sickening images that look to her like a good kid caught in a bad movie he can't escape.

Photo: Reade Seligmann is accused in a rape case at Duke University. (Photo by Gerry Broome/Associated Press)

