

NEWS

Digital predators, teen victims, Part 1: One girl shares her ordeal to warn others



Most child and teenage sexual assault victims know the attacker before the assault. Against the national landscape, one 15-year-old shares her story, her struggles and how to survive. (Illustration by Jeff Geortzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **DAVID WHITING** | dwhiting@scng.com | Orange County Register

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Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series.

"We were just 13 and 15 years old."

With those words, a teenager we will call Jane Doe starts to write her Victim Impact Statement about how a young man she met on the Internet stole “the most precious years of a girl’s life.”

With the support of her parents, she practices reading her statement again and again, struggling to stop from weeping as she recounts the assaults three years ago when she was 15 and one of the other victims was just 13.

More than almost anything, the teenager wants the man who pleaded guilty to two misdemeanors and four felonies involving four different victims in four different places to hear her voice in a courtroom ring loud and strong and clear.

But after 33 god-awful months, her fear, anger, confusion and pain prove too much. It is mid-September – less than a month ago – and Jane, now a high school senior, breaks down in the halls of justice, unable to speak.

No teenager should have to sit in a courtroom struggling to read her own words because she is sobbing, because when she was a high school freshman she connected online – according to her Victim Impact Statement – with a “sick, narcissistic predator that searches for girls on social media and then preys on girls that are much younger.”

Yet that is what happened three years ago, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, she writes in her statement.

More alarming is that despite widespread warnings about Internet predators, there are scores of Jane Does.

Similar crimes continue to occur across America as new waves of unsuspecting and naive teens meet online predators who masquerade as kindly men or the proverbial boy next door.

Consider that Jane’s assailant, who was 18 when they met, was a soccer player on his high school and college teams.

He also was an Eagle Scout.

Smartphone danger

Sex assault victims and the people who hurt them come in all shapes and ages. Some are long-time acquaintances, but that is not what this series is about. This series is about sex assaults against young people that are aided and abetted by the Internet.

Few are immune and if you think your child is safe, think again. The Orange County District Attorney's office estimates that, on average, they see a new case involving a digital predator once a week.

Jane Doe is smart, aware and tech savvy. She is loved and cared for by her parents and lives in a multimillion-dollar home on Orange County's gold coast.

Still – like nearly all young teens – she wasn't world-wise or street-smart.

According to Jane Doe, she met her assailant on Instagram. She says she thought he was younger than she was. For a few weeks, they communicated briefly on and off. He reportedly wanted to switch to Snapchat, but she didn't have a Snapchat account. Then she mentioned she was home alone from school, sick.

Jane Doe says, "He became very persistent," and said they could watch a movie. She gave up her address.

When the man she met online arrived at the family home, Jane was barely 15.

Her bedroom was decorated with white wallpaper, small pink roses and pink ribbons. The bedding had pink polka dots. She treasured her stuffed panda and fuzzy bunny.

For Jane, however, her smartphone opened a dangerous crack.

During one of several interviews, Jane's father – names are withheld because the victim is a minor as well as a sexual assault victim – reaches across a table and holds out his cellphone.

"This," he warns, barely able to contain the anger and pain of the last several years, "is a key to your child's room."

Understand, John Doe is a tech whiz who regularly monitored his children's smartphones.

Even so, the hunted are no match for the hunters.

According to a survey of juvenile victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes, "the majority met the predator willingly face-to-face."

Additionally, "93 percent of those encounters included sexual contact."

In Jane Doe's case, the defendant – now a convict – is a young man named Christian Callahan. He turned 21 last month and this weekend started a 180-day jail sentence.

To report the defendant's point of view, I visited the Callahan family home. No one answered the door and a note resulted in a phone call from Callahan's attorney, Jeremy Goldman, stating that his client declines to talk.

Yet until his arrest, the convict's bona fides appeared impeccable.

A decade ago, Orange County Register surf writer Corky Carroll shared in his column that his son reported he had a good group of friends. "Christian Callahan is funny," Carroll's son wrote, "and really good at soccer."



Christian Callahan

Several years later, in 2012, Callahan for his Eagle Scout project created a free soccer clinic to inspire kids to donate sports equipment that would be shipped to Africa. That July, KABC news covered Callahan's efforts and reported the boy "is living up to the finest tradition of scouting."

A few years ago, The Orange County Register went so far as to give Callahan a soccer shout out, calling him “a player to watch.” In a recent photo, Callahan smiles in his Irvine Valley College soccer uniform.

His parents’ home in south Orange County has a view and includes four bedrooms and three bathrooms.

But it wasn’t shared goals or living in homes of comfort that drew Jane Doe and Callahan together. It was a confluence of events in which online connections away from the eyes of parents played a key role.

Misplaced guilt, shame

It is one week after Callahan entered the Doe home and Jane has told no one in the family about Callahan’s visit or what happened.

Jane is ashamed, frightened and filled with self-blame over what occurred in her bedroom as well as allowing a stranger into the house.

Guilt and fear are all too common. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, only 30 percent of sexual assault cases are reported to authorities and only 16 percent of rape cases are reported.

The statistics get worse.

About 20 million women, or 18 percent, have been raped during their lifetime, the justice department states. Nearly 36 percent of sexual assaults occur when victims are between 12 and 17.

After plea bargaining, Callahan admits to felony charges involving Jane Doe that include “luring of a child,” “distribute pornography to minor with intent to engage in sexual conduct,” and “unlawful sexual intercourse with minor who is three years younger than the perpetrator.”

“Unlawful sexual intercourse” is what many generally refer to as “statutory rape.”

Five-foot-2 and 115 pounds, Jane Doe reports she froze and stared at a digital clock during the assault. Experts call such a move “disassociation,” and explain it’s a defense mechanism in the brain that helps us survive trauma.

As Callahan starts to leave the Doe home, according to a court statement, he asks, “Aren’t you going to walk me to the door? Don’t you have manners?”

After a week, Jane Doe can’t hold back her pain and shame any longer. In a torrent of tears, she blurts to a school guidance counselor what happened.

The counselor immediately calls Jane's mother and asks her to come to school. Mom is a woman of intelligence and substance and is used to handling international challenges with ease. Still, the call unnerves.

"Is this bullying?" Mom asks.

"No," the counselor says. "All I can tell you is that it's not her fault."

Attempting to comprehend what's going on, Mom explains she has an important appointment with a group of people. "What's the reason?" she demands. "You need to tell me right now."

"Your daughter's been raped."

Grim game of numbers

The word, "rape," sucks the air out of the car. Jane Doe's mother feels like she's been slugged in the stomach. She can't breathe.

There is nothing in her body that prepares her for the word "rape." Her brain can't connect the awful word with her little girl.

Finally, Mom manages to gather herself. She drives toward the school and calls her husband. The conversation is surreal. Their world has exploded.

Dad pushes away all emotion and shifts into emergency mode. But, in truth, he knows it's too late to save his daughter from the horror that's already happened.

As their daughter opens up a little, Mom, Dad and daughter hug and share tears. But they can only focus on the immediate.

Later, Mom and Dad learn the crime occurred inside the family home, an affront that seems to compound the cruelty. Yet the location is not unusual.

The justice department reports that 69 percent of sexual assaults involving teens happen in the victim's home, the offender's home or a friend's home.

As I come to know the family, Jane Doe's mother plops a stack of paper on the living room table. She says it contains more than 300 photographs of girls from Callahan's Instagram account.

My review of Callahan's Instagram account shows he has 127 followers and follows 313 accounts.

On something called Ask.fm, another global social networking site, I find an account with Callahan's name and photo that has 9,276 "likes" and a whopping 7,548 posts.

Never heard of Ask.fm? Talk to a teenager. Chances are they – along with 215 million others – have the app.

The day after Callahan assaults Jane Doe, his Ask.fm account resumes activity.

In response to one query, Callahan's Ask.fm account answers, "Oh okay haha. Yeah im not posting a picture of my abs sorry (smiley face)." Then, the Callahan account user suggests switching to an app in which texts can't be traced. "Just snapchat me v maybe you'll be lucky and i'll show you."

The difference between Ask.fm and Snapchat is significant. Ask.fm allows written conversation to remain online. But Snapchat, a hugely popular social media app, causes texts – evidence, in criminal cases – to vanish within 10 seconds.

Weeks later, police turn Callahan's digital tools against him. Pretending to be Jane Doe, a detective texts Callahan and suggests he drop by the Doe home. The sting works. Callahan is arrested and jailed.

But by evening, Jane Doe's family discovers the suspect has already been released on bail.

Next: For victims, the assault is only the beginning of the trauma.

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NEWS

Digital predators, teen victims, Part 2: After sexual assault, a life is shattered



A sexual assault is only the beginning of trauma. Victims often face shattered lives, but little by little many also learn to rebuild. (Illustration by Jeff Goertzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Editor's note: This is the second of a three-part series.

Nearly three years after a sexual assault, a teenage girl finally has her opportunity to give voice to thousands of others who have been similarly affected by Internet predators.

"Because of you, my trust in others is broken. Because of you, I close everyone off and I can't bring myself to open up to anyone anymore," she writes in her Victim Impact Statement. "Think about all the girls you hurt."

It is a passionate, powerful and heart-wrenching declaration. Yet perhaps the most tragic point comes a little later when she says the hurt never goes away, that there will be "pain for days, weeks, months and even years."

You've heard the old saw that our criminal justice system favors the criminal, not the victim. That's debatable. But it's clear that in its current state, justice – at best – is a long and winding road for sex assault victims.

By the time she faces her assailant in court for the sentencing, the girl we'll call Jane Doe already has endured a tortured journey of 33 months.

Consider that soon after the then-15-year-old is sexually assaulted in her home by an online predator, she must be examined for sexually transmitted diseases. Yet even that day quickly fades into the maelstrom that follows.

While her assailant, then 18, reports online that his parents have taken away his smartphone – a tool he used to lure others, according to court records – Jane Doe's life begins to slip away.

Advised by the courts not to discuss her case, friends start dropping away as Jane Doe – her name is masked here because she's a minor as well as a sexual assault victim – changes from a happy, hard-charging soccer player to a quiet and depressed girl.

She isolates herself. She loses friends. Her grade point average, critical for college admission, plummets from 3.4 to 2.1.

For months, antidepressants only create a fog and therapy does little. She ends up in the hospital, doubled over with excruciating stomach pain. In despair, she attempts suicide.

As with many assault victims – especially young ones who are still trying to sort out the world – Jane can't climb out of her deep well of depression.

Fortunately, with much therapy, family support and after many months, she comes to find solace in the fact that she is not alone.

"I have learned that 83 percent of rape victims experience this embarrassment," she writes in her Victim Impact Statement, "feeling ashamed and having the feeling that it is their fault for being sexually assaulted."

Still, the damage continues. While Jane Doe struggles to put her life back together, her assailant is out on bail, attends college, works at a grocery store, plays soccer.

Finally, the defendant, Christian Callahan, is convicted of four felonies and two misdemeanors involving four victims over a half-year.



Christian Callahan

Through his attorney, Jeremy Goldman, Callahan declines to comment for this series.

During Callahan's sentencing in mid-September, Jane Doe is too broken to read. Still, her Victim Impact Statement is heard.

"You ruined each one of our childhoods," a victim's advocate reads. "You stole the most precious years of a girl's life."

“Those are the years when girls have their first crushes, their first dates, their first everything, but not their first and last assault.”

Deep trauma

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that out of every 1,000 rapes, only 13 will be referred to a prosecutor and seven will result in a felony conviction.

To increase those odds as well as to thread their way through a sometimes mysterious system, Jane Doe’s parents hire a victim’s rights attorney and drive 6,500 miles over nearly three years to meet with doctors and counselors.

They also attend 26 court proceedings.

During one early court hearing, Jane’s mother spots the defendant sitting in the hallway. Her ire flares. She tells her husband she is going to say something. He advises her to keep quiet.

Mom, head of a large corporation, walks by Callahan, stops and turns. “You’ve messed with the wrong family.”

Callahan looks up. “Excuse me?”

In the war for justice, it is barely a skirmish. But when it comes to protecting and defending your daughter, sometimes a skirmish is all you get.

And sometimes, if you wait long enough, you get more.



Michael Fell. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Michael Fell is a former deputy district attorney, where he was a specialist in sex crimes. Since leaving the Orange County DA's office a decade ago, he has worked as a criminal lawyer and a victim's rights attorney.

Fell explains part of his job is helping families navigate what can be a daunting, complex and sometimes baffling legal system. Another responsibility is talking to detectives, prosecutors and anyone else who might help.

In separate interviews, I suggest to both Fell and Jane Doe's parents – who have spent thousands of dollars – that it seems unfair to have a system in which the aggrieved need to hire an attorney.

Mom and Dad say it was worth the money and explain Fell helped them find firmer footing when dealing with the criminal justice system.

For his part, Fell calls the lead detective on the Callahan case as well as the prosecutors "class A" people. Still, as an attorney with a voice of record in courtrooms, he explains, he can bring out issues that might not otherwise be addressed.

When it appeared that the process dragged on unnecessarily, for example, Fell explained the reasons to Jane Doe's parents. Rather than foot-dragging, detectives were pursuing other leads.

When a seemingly never-ending series of assistant district attorneys were switched out – five in Jane Doe's case – Fell could explain why that particular unit has turnover.

Regardless, the ordeal is brutal and every day impacts Jane Doe and her family.

"This goes beyond anything you can put in writing," Dad allows. "It permeates every aspect of your life. The time alone is astronomical. There's also an emotional and physical toll. You suffer in silence.

"As a family, we've lost three years."

Moving forward

Vanessa Reyna is assault services director for the Orange County nonprofit called "Waymakers," an organization connected with the DA's office as well as with law enforcement.



Vanessa Maldonado Reyna (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Waymakers has 300 staff members, one-third of whom offer free victim support. The goal is to make the process as painless as possible.

Some victims contact Waymakers directly (the 24-hour hotline is 714-957-2737). Other victims first call law enforcement who, in turn, contact victim assistance.

From rape kit through sentencing, there are tortured feelings, hurdles upon hurdles, defense delays, Reyna advises. Most cases take two to three years before they reach conclusion.

Yet perseverance matters, Reyna stresses. Staying with the process can not only result in a conviction, it can empower victims.

Support, she explains, includes helping victims affirm their feelings – almost any reaction is considered normal – ensuring there is adequate food, shelter and safety, that friends and family are available.

If a victim contacts law enforcement within the first five days, Reyna notes, there is a good chance an exam will find DNA that can help a court case. Even after five days, exams can be helpful.

Sadly, many victims wait days, weeks, even months – or years – before they report or share with friends that they were assaulted. According to California's [Megan's Law website](#) the reasons vary.

“Victims may want to deny the fact that someone they trusted could do this to them,” Megan’s Law experts state. “They may want to just put it behind them; they may believe the myth that they caused the assault by their behavior; or they may fear how other people will react to the truth.”

Fortunately, advocates also reinforce a victim’s strengths and abilities.

One victim shared that after her case was over, “It was like I just took a backpack of bricks off my back.”

Another victim, Reyna says, sobbed violently after her assailant was sentenced, yet later managed to smile and say, “I’m ready to go home.”

“Overcoming trauma,” Reyna says, “means understanding the process of feelings, what the body is doing, validating that you’re not broken.”

Certain myths, however, can make understanding trauma even more challenging.

We often are told that there are two responses in an attack: fight or flight. But there is a third response called “freezing.”

In sexual assault cases – especially one in which the perpetrator is known – it is common for the victim to “freeze.”

Freezing, Jane Doe allows, is what happened to her.

To protect mind and body, Reyna explains, a chemical in the brain can command the body to stop moving. Sometimes the mind races; sometimes there is disassociation to the point where victims report out-of-body experiences. Some even feel they are watching their own assault.

During her assault, Jane Doe reports she survived by focusing on a digital clock and its glowing lines that formed numbers. Now, she can’t bear to look at such clocks.

But don’t mistake freezing for yielding.

“Lying motionless, offering no verbal consent, not showing expression means you didn’t say ‘yes,’” Reyna points out. She adds involuntary freezing is especially common among teens and young adults.

Even after a court case closes, processing sexual assault continues, Reyna says. She likens it to a scar after a bad wound.

Victims usually “need to integrate the experience into their lives,” Reyna offers. “To get their lives back, they need to find a new normal.

"You're not broken, your life doesn't end, but you become a survivor."

"Resiliency is so admirable," she emphasizes. Victims become "the strongest of warriors."

As we talk about what being a warrior means, the final words of Jane Doe's Victim Impact Statement grow ever louder in my mind.

"As a registered sex offender," she wrote to her assailant, a status confirmed by the District Attorney's office, "you will carry this dark secret forever."

Next: [To curtail sexual assault, knowledge is power.](#)

Tags: [Crime](#), [David Whiting](#), [Top Stories Breeze](#), [top stories ivdb](#), [Top Stories LADN](#), [Top Stories LBPT](#), [Top Stories OCR](#), [Top Stories PE](#), [Top Stories PSN](#), [top stories rdf](#), [Top Stories SGVT](#), [top stories sun](#), [Top Stories WDN](#)

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NEWS

Digital predators, teen victims, Part 3: Surviving and changing sexual assault culture



Most sexual assaults are devastating, but victims learn to find a new normal and there are tips on how to move forward as well as how to help teens stay safe. (Illustration by Jeff Goertzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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series.

in court, glances at the man her
begins to read.

"I never thought it possible that my daughter would be a victim of any crime," she says, "nor that my husband and I would ever be considered victims of anything."

Yet the man Mom faces has pleaded guilty to unlawful sexual intercourse not just with her daughter but with three other teenage girls, including a 13-year-old.

Until her daughter faced an assailant, Mom – like most of us – didn't truly grasp the staggering power of the Internet, a digital world where ruthless, soulless predators come lurking.

"Most Internet-initiated sex crimes," states the New England Journal of Public Policy, "involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters.

"Most such offenders are charged with crimes, such as statutory rape, that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults."

An organization called Common Sense Media cautions online connections often are made in chat rooms, on social media, or in chat areas of multiplayer games such as Roblox and Minecraft.

Still, not even the 15-year-old victim's father, a technology geek with deep knowledge of both the Internet and the extraordinary reach of smartphones, could save his daughter from allowing a man she'd never met in person to enter the family home.

Consider that the U.S. Department of Justice reports that an estimated 60 percent of child sex abuse cases involve acquaintances.

Perhaps more troubling is that a national survey found that one in nine girls under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault.

Still, there are ways to fight back and stop assaults before they happen.

A coffee mug my sister gave me states, "Read, rise, resist." Let's start there.

Internet stalkers

The image of an older man ensnaring a teenage girl over the Internet is familiar. Less known, however, is the fact that many predators are teens or young adults.

A nonprofit called Child Lures Prevention reports, "Nearly one-third of sexual offenders are aged 12-19, teens themselves."

The man who assaulted the 15-year-old – a girl we are calling Jane Doe because she is a minor and a sexual assault victim – was 18 years old when the incident occurred.

Now 21, he just started serving a sentence of 180 days in jail and also became a registered sex offender.

“Meeting someone over social media is a very risky situation,” cautions victim rights attorney Michael Fell. “Part of the issue is that just because you’re talking online, doesn’t mean you know them.”

Kal Kaliban, head of the Orange County District Attorney’s sexual assault unit, oversees a massive operation that takes up an entire floor of a building in downtown Santa Ana.

Kaliban estimates 80 percent of sexual assault cases involve children and that his office handles, on average, a case a week involving a digital predator.

“The Internet is a tool for these predators and,” Kaliban allows, “unfortunately, parents don’t know what’s going on under their roofs.”

To combat Internet predators, Kaliban and other experts explain that parents need to monitor their children’s smartphones daily as well as their kids’ apps and texts. Additionally, parents should ask their children who they are communicating with on the Internet.

Those are good, sensible and practical suggestions that any parent should follow. Still, let’s admit that warnings about Internet predators have been broadcast loud and clear for more than a decade.

Protecting your child from smartphone danger has become somewhat akin to trying to protect a sandcastle on the beach. There are waves of digital hunters who are experts in breaking down a child’s defenses.

Additionally, Kaliban warns, “Kids tend to think that they’re invincible, that nothing’s going to happen to them.”

But in reality, Kaliban cautions, “Kids don’t know who they’re talking to on the other end, get lured very easily and the result can change their lives in a horrible way.”

Orange County District Attorney chief of staff Susan Kang Schroeder points out, for example, that in some Internet stalking cases, predators have trapped teens into sex trafficking operations.

Still, parents and teens have power by following some simple rules. You might want to etch them on your child's phone.

Common Sense Media makes it simple. "Never share a phone number, address, or even last name with someone (you've) never met. "

But that's only the beginning.

Know your rights

A common theme emerged while I interviewed victims, parents and experts about sexual assault: Knowledge is power.

For anyone, and especially for young people such as Jane Doe, there should be no confusion about what constitutes undue sexual pressure and how to handle unwanted activity.

"When you're engaging in sexual activity, consent is about communication," declares the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. "And it should happen every time."

Called RAINN, short for Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nonprofit partners with more than 1,000 local providers, operates the helpline for the Department of Defense and runs the National Sexual Assault Hotline, 800-656-HOPE.

In a word, RAINN has credibility. If nothing else, share the following two paragraphs – please.

"Giving consent for one activity, one time, does not mean giving consent for increased or recurring sexual contact. For example, agreeing to kiss someone doesn't give that person permission to remove your clothes.

"You can withdraw consent at any point if you feel uncomfortable," RAINN stipulates. "It's important to clearly communicate to your partner that you are no longer comfortable with this activity and wish to stop."

California law describes consent this way: "The person must act freely and voluntarily and have knowledge of the nature of the act or transaction involved."

Under California law, you must be 18 or older to be able to consent.

For unlawful sexual intercourse with a person under 18 – commonly called statutory rape – punishments vary depending on the age of the offender as well as the age of the victim. A misdemeanor can include up to a year imprisonment; felonies can require up to four years in prison.

The punishments for rape are usually far harsher. In California, rape is defined by physical violence, threats, intimidation, someone unable to comply.

On RAINN's website, there are pages of information covering a wide range of sexual assault issues as well as tips.

For parents with teens, the following suggestion may have the most impact: "Use your own experience to tell a safety story.

"Sharing your own experiences can make these conversations relevant and feel more real to teens," RAINN states. "If you don't have an experience you feel comfortable sharing, you can tell a story about someone you know."

As I write this column, Jane Doe shares that with her assailant's sentencing in September and his incarceration this month, she feels for the first time that she is starting to heal.

Still, the legacy of the assault lingers – and likely always will.

In her Victim Impact Statement, Jane Doe writes, "Girls shouldn't have to feel scared when they go out. Girls should not be afraid of walking to their cars or walking home, (to) school or to work.

"Girls shouldn't be so afraid that (they) have to carry rape alarms, rape whistles, tasers, mace, pepper spray or anything else that is a defense tool.

"Too many girls today live in fear."

Jane Doe is right. It's time we change our culture of assault and denial.

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