

Lawsuit alleges Brighton High harbored sex abuser

‘I need people to understand how insidious this ... abuse really is’

Steve Orr

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He was a teacher at Brighton High School, accomplished and popular. She was a ninth-grader.

He taught English and advised the literary club. She wanted to be a writer and wanted him to be her mentor.

He took her under his wing, but then allegedly more. The teacher lured the teenage student, 20 years younger, into a close personal relationship and into sex.

After she graduated high school and their contact came to an end, he remained a teacher, accomplished and popular. She became an educator and a writer, but she had emotional problems that took decades to sort out.

On Tuesday the former student, Tara Yellen, filed a lawsuit against the Brighton Central School District, accusing it of failing to protect her from the alleged predation of its former teacher, Gary Alan Wiener.

Yellen, now 47, said she is suing to bring attention to teacher-student sexual abuse.

“This was so damaging to me. I know I’m not alone. I know this type of abuse devastated and continues to devastate so many other people. I need people to understand how insidious this type of abuse really is,” Yellen said in an interview.

The story of predatory teachers forging abusive relationships with vulnerable students who are legally and emotionally unable to consent is an old one. In recent decades, most people have come to believe that such interactions are both illegal and immoral and should not be tolerated.

him, but I did,” she said.

Yellen said she alienated herself from high school friends because she didn’t want them to find out about her improper affair with a married teacher 20 years her senior.

She spent a great deal of time with Wiener in and out of the school building, and peers sometimes asked her if she was sleeping with him. She denied it.

Yellen and one of her lawyers, Vincent Nappo, said they do not yet know if school administrators were aware that Wiener was in an improper relationship with a student. Likewise, they do not know if he engaged in similar behavior with other students.

Yellen confided in a few non-school friends but later lied to one of them who objected, telling her the relationship had ended.

At that time, it had not. It continued through the time Yellen graduated.

‘It’s not OK’

Yellen left Rochester for college in the Midwest in the fall of 1990. “I remember in retrospect feeling some relief to be going many states away,” she said.

During her freshman year, she gathered the courage to tell him it was over. He came to visit her. She spurned him and never saw him again.

“I was relieved, I was confused. I had been focusing on his needs, which was one of the results of that twisted sort of relationship — it was about his needs. I went to him vulnerable and needy and he took advantage of that for his own needs,” she said.

Yellen remained guilty and unhappy for years afterward, but said with the help of therapy she is able to deal with what happened openly and properly.

But Yellen said they still happen.

“Schools need to protect children, and that includes teenagers who may look like adults and sometimes even act like adults but who are not adults,” she said. “What may seem consensual even to the kid is not consensual.”

Nothing to say

Yellen, who graduated from Brighton in 1990 and now lives out of state, filed suit Tuesday in state Supreme Court under auspices of New York’s Child Victims Act.

She is the second person to sue the district under the CVA. The first accused a one-time teacher at Council Rock Elementary School, Duncan Ververs, of sexually abusing a girl, though court papers did not make clear if she was a student at the school.

Brighton district officials, citing pending litigation, declined to comment Tuesday on Yellen’s lawsuit or to say anything about Wiener’s time at the high school.

Numerous other CVA lawsuits have been filed across the state accusing public- and private-school teachers of coercing or cajoling students into harmful, abusive relationships.

Locally, the most noteworthy cases involve retired music teacher Edwin Fleming, who has been sued by 10 women who said they were groped or raped by him while students at East or West high schools in Rochester between the late 1960s and the early 1980s.

Those lawsuits are pending.

Wiener, 67, declined comment to a reporter who knocked on his door Tuesday.

Wiener was at Brighton High School from the 1980s until 2000, and at one time headed the English department there before leaving to be an administrator in the Greece Central School District.

He was the English standards leader in the Pittsford Central School District from 2008 to 2014, when he retired. He is also a freelance

“It really wasn’t until recently that the full impact of what happened, and a full understanding of how wrong and really damaging it was, became clear to me,” she said.

Yellen remains angry about being pulled into something that was so wrong.

“I believe passionately that teachers and mentors can do so much good. It’s a really powerful role. But with that power has to come responsibility,” she said. “That moment when I came to him needing a parental role model, needing a mentor for my writing — that was a moment that could have set the stage for so much good in my life. He should never have crossed that line and taken advantage of my vulnerability.”

Yellen credits the Me Too movement with demonstrating that filing suit and speaking publicly about her experience could empower others and help change the minds of people who don’t yet believe that teacherstudent sex is taboo.

“I’m still seeing movies and TV shows and so many other indications that we romanticize this idea of the teacher-student relationship,” Yellen said.

“It’s still happening and it’s not OK.”

Contact watchdog reporter Steve Orr at sorr@democratandchronicle.com or at (585) 258-2386. Follow him on Twitter at @SOrr1.

writer who has written or edited numerous books and articles.

‘Feeling nothing’ Yellen said she met Wiener at a time when upheaval at home made her lonely. “Dr. Wiener,” as she still calls him, proved a strong and friendly figure who provided encouragement.

“I went to him hungry for guidance and acceptance and assurance that I was worth caring about. He talked to me, he told me on numerous occasions that he loved me like a daughter, he told me how talented I was, and I was desperate for all of this,” she said.

They were platonic friends until the last day of her junior year, when he kissed her for the first time. In that instant, when she realized he wanted romance and sex, a part of her froze.

“I went from being excited and exhilarated and from what I thought was love, to feeling nothing,” Yellen said.

She said she learned during years of therapy that disassociation, an involuntary process by which the mind copes with trauma, was to blame for her feeling of remoteness.

“I thought there was something wrong with me and felt guilty and angry with myself. I pushed through it and didn’t want to have sex with



Brighton High School in May 2018. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Tara Yellen (1990 photo)

PROVIDED



Gary Wiener (1992 photo) BRIGHTON HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK

