

# Bivona program lauded after arrest of principal

## CENTER PLAYS CRUCIAL ROLE IN INVESTIGATION

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This much we know: The Bivona Child Advocacy Center recently took its curriculum into Northwood Elementary School, telling children about sexual abuse.

Not long thereafter, law enforcement was alerted that the school’s principal, Kirk Ashton, may have molested a boy. Within days, that investigation grew from allegations of one abused student to claims – and criminal charges – that he had molested nine on school grounds.

The exact turn of events has not been spelled out, but authorities have made clear that, had it not been for the work of Bivona and its counselors and instructors, the arrest of Ashton may not have happened.

“I feel strongly that we would not be here if it were not for the (Bivona) educational program,” Assistant District Attorney Sara VanStrydonck said at a news conference after Ashton’s arrest.

Bivona Executive Director Deb Rosen said “the initial disclosure was basically immediately after (a curriculum session at Northwood).” She said she could not comment further about the disclosure because of the ongoing investigation.

Ashton is accused of abusing nine boys between 8 and 12 years old. He has been indicted by a grand

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*Bivona Child Advocacy Center executive director*



**Kirk Ashton is led out of Greece Town Court after he was arraigned April 14. He is accused of abusing nine boys between 8 and 12 years old. WILL CLEVELAND/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

jury, but the indictment has yet to be formally handed up and is not yet public. He has been suspended from the Hilton school district elementary school.

Ashton's arrest has brought Bivona attention unlike any criminal case with which it has been involved in the past. And it has been involved in many.

At the Bivona center at 1 Mt. Hope Ave., social workers, police and county child protective staff collaborate on child abuse investigations. And, as evidenced with Northwood, a team of instructors takes age-appropriate lessons into the schools to discuss the sensitive topic of abuse – a topic all the more sensitive because most children are abused by people they know, trust and sometimes love.

“Unfortunately, even tragically, the threat that children face is not from strangers,” Rosen said. “The threat that children face is from people that they know and people that they know very well and they trust. That’s a difficult reality for parents and children to grapple with together.”

Mary Whittier, the center’s first executive director, was key to the birth of Bivona, which is named to honor Lou Bivona and his wife, Kathie, who helped found the center. The Bivonas also established the local chapter of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

The center opened in 2004, and Whittier remembers the projections of how many children were likely to be seen.

“If we could see 200 (children) our first year, that would be our goal,” said Whittier, who is now the interim executive director for RESOLVE, which confronts domestic abuse. “We saw 525 children our first year.”

### **Under one roof**

The center was initially located on Lake Avenue in the city, but the need for its work quickly became evident, and it moved to the larger Mt. Hope Avenue facility. There, Bivona pulled teams of police, counselors, child protective investigators and social workers under one roof.

Whittier credits Rosen with the lessons for children like those that led to Ashton’s arrest.

“Her thing was to get a good curriculum, a well-evaluated children’s curriculum, to go into the schools,” Whittier said.

Bivona has been providing a curriculum for several school districts for students from kindergarten to eighth grade. The curriculum offers two lessons a year.

“I think a key message (with the Ashton arrest) is education works,” Rosen said. “There are some really high-quality reinforcement materials that are provided to educators and parents. You have an entire community surrounding the child, speaking the same language.”

For young victims of abuse, coming forward can be difficult, especially when the abuser is someone they know, as it most typically is.

“The silver lining in this has to be the courage of these kids coming forward,” Whittier said. “That is huge. They should be supported. They do not have a future of doom and gloom if they get the support.”

Those with information are asked to contact State Police at 585-279-0144. Potential victims can also contact the Bivona Child Advocacy Center at 585935-7800.

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“After we moved to Mt. Hope, we kind of put a stake in the ground at that facility,” Whittier said. “... I was told it was never going to work, it’s never going to work to have cops and social workers in the same building.”

At the center, children who may be abuse victims are interviewed by counselors specifically trained to put the youth at ease, ask non-leading questions and prevent a possible eruption of trauma. Those interviews can become the focus of police investigations. For years, they were not video recorded, but, after questions raised by some defense lawyers, Bivona began recording the sessions.

“A forensics interviewer probably does between 10 and 15 interviews a week,” Rosen said.



**Bivona Child Advocacy Executive Director Deb Rosen discusses the arrest of elementary school principal Kirk Ashton on April 15 at Greece police headquarters. SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**



**Whittier**



**Ashton**