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Goodbye party for teacher convicted of not reporting abuse canceled after victims groups' involvement

Brian Roewe | Oct. 18, 2013

Two sexual abuse victims groups crashed a party planned for a former Arkansas high school athletic director convicted of failing to report the sexual abuse of a minor.

The National Survivor Advocates Coalition and the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests alerted Little Rock, Ark., Bishop Anthony Taylor in a letter Wednesday about a going-away party for Kathy Griffin, who in September was found guilty of not reporting a sexual relationship between a fellow teacher and a high school student at the all-girls Mount St. Mary Academy.

Griffin, who also worked as a guidance counselor and dean of discipline, was sentenced to a year of probation and fined $2,500. She is appealing the decision.

The event for Griffin, promoted on Facebook and through an online invitation website, asked friends to gather at a Little Rock restaurant Saturday "as we say a heart felt good-bye as she moves on to the next phase in her life." It asked people to share memories and create a money tree "to show her what she has meant to all of us."

Planners confirmed that the event has since been canceled. As of Thursday afternoon, 43 people had planned to attend. A Facebook group, "Support Coach Kathy Griffin," also encouraged people to donate to a special bank account established in her name.

"We were just trying to help a friend," Katie Escovedo, listed as a host on the online invitation, told *NCR*.

But the abuse victims' groups said the event represented a public sign of support for a convicted person at the expense of the victim and other possible victims. Such public displays make it harder for the abused and for others to come forward and report their abuse, said Barbara Dorris, SNAP outreach director.

"Imagine if you are the victim in this case and you see your community supporting the predators as opposed to supporting you. That's very hurtful," she told *NCR*, adding that if people felt the need to support Griffin, they should do so privately: "Bake her cookies, go visit her, take her out to lunch."

"What we're trying to encourage people to do is think about your actions. Does it make it easier for victims to come forward or does it make it harder for victims to come forward?" Dorris said.

In their letter, the groups asked Taylor to denounce the event and forbid Catholic employees from attending. A spokesman for the Little Rock diocese said the bishop could not comment because he had not received the letter. The school is sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy.

Griffin's lawyer said the abuse victims groups misunderstood the nature of the event, pointing to their description of it as a fundraiser in their press release and letter to the archbishop. Jeff Rosenzweig, who was not involved in the planning, likened it to a retirement party where co-workers might be encouraged to contribute

money to the retiree as a gift.

"It's not what you would call a fundraiser in normal English," he said.

In late February 2012, the student, at that point age 18 and in college, told her parents she had a sexual relationship with Kelly O'Rourke, a Mount St. Mary math teacher and volleyball and basketball coach, according to news reports and Rosenzweig. The relationship began when the girl was 16. Rosenzweig said his client learned of the relationship from O'Rourke, with whom she had a relationship and lived with at various times, around the same time.

Both Griffin, 56, and O'Rourke, 42, were fired in mid-March 2012.

During the September trial, prosecutors said Griffin learned of the relationship Feb. 24, 2012, and that she delayed notifying authorities for two weeks, according to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. The newspaper also reported that O'Rourke had testified -- a required part of her plea deal that included four months in prison -- that she had denied the existence of the relationship to Griffin several times.

Rosenzweig said his client did report the relationship between O'Rourke and the student to a sexual abuse hotline on March 11, 2012, but was told they could not take the call because the girl was 18 at the time. Griffin made the report as an anonymous caller, Rosenzweig said.

"[Griffin] reported it. She did not report it quick enough to satisfy the prosecutor, but she did report it," he said.

He added that the delay in reporting came at the request of the girl's parents, though affidavits from the original police report said Griffin had contacted the family Feb. 24 to persuade them not to report "to do the best thing for the school," the *Democrat-Gazette* reported.

Griffin and her lawyer have filed a note of appeal to the Arkansas Supreme Court. A ruling could take as long as a year.

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org [1]. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe [2].]

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