

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, PAINFUL SECRETS

The unexpected price of reporting abuse: retaliation

By **Globe Staff** July 20, 2016, 8:33 p.m.



Erika Schickel was asked to leave Buxton School in Williamstown in 1982 after school officials discovered her relationship with a teacher. "The top priority . . . was to get rid of me," she said. BRET HARTMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FOR THE BOSTON GLO

This story was reported and written by Jenn Abelson, Bella English, Jonathan Saltzman, and Todd Wallack of the Globe Spotlight Team.

[Update: Report names 12 at Choate Rosemary Hall who allegedly abused](#)

students


When a small boarding school in the Berkshires discovered that a music teacher was having a sexual relationship with a female student, administrators responded in a way many parents would applaud: They fired him.

But Buxton School officials took another step as well. They asked the teenager to leave.


Just weeks before graduation in 1982, 18-year-old Erika Schickel was told that her continued presence would make others at the school uncomfortable. That included the teacher's girlfriend, who worked there.

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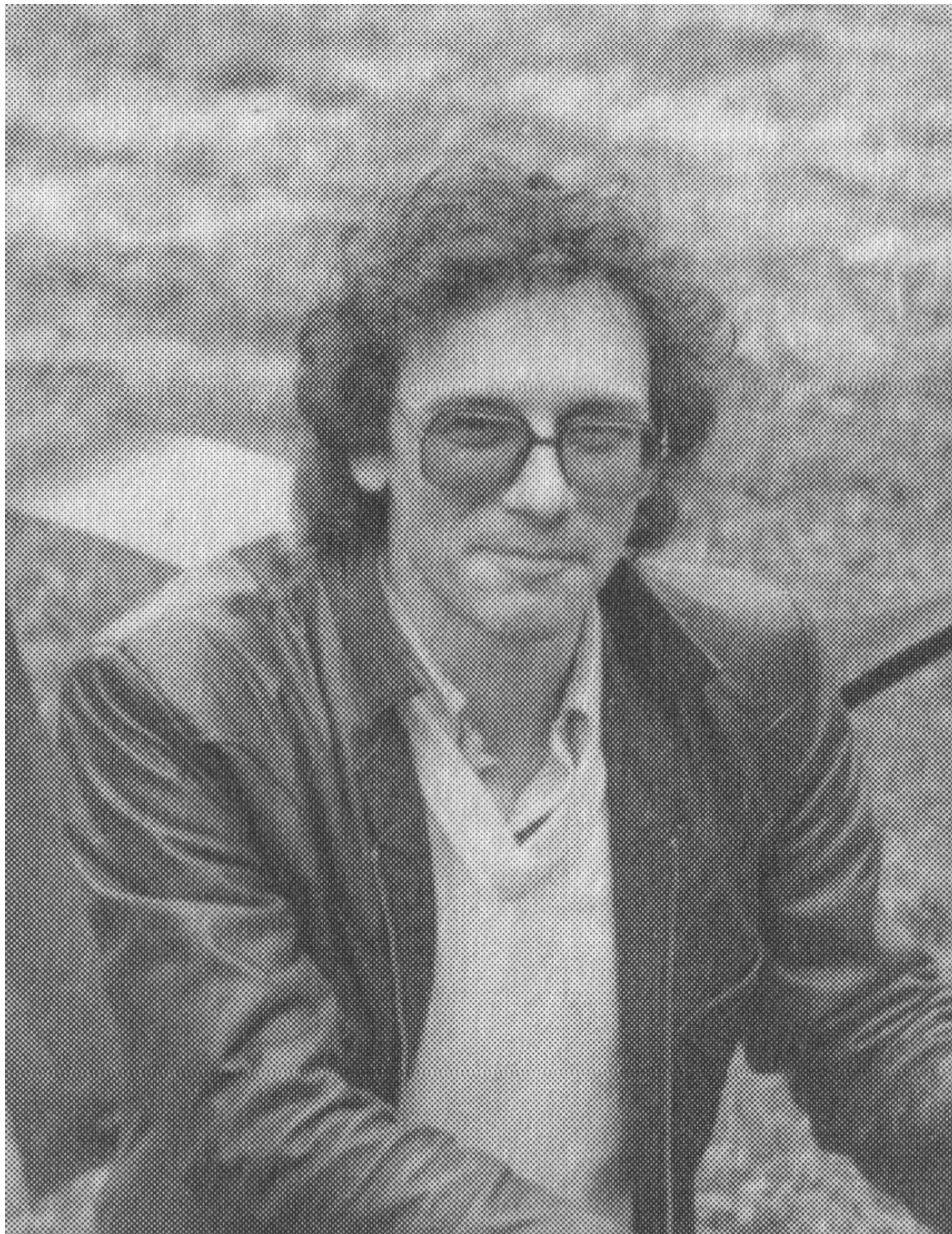
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Buxton officials unceremoniously sent Schickel a diploma in the mail and included her picture in the yearbook only at the insistence of indignant friends.

“The top priority for the school was to get rid of me,” said Schickel, who remembers boarding the bus in Williamstown to leave, heartbroken and confused. “I walked around in a daze for years, so torn up and destroyed. I had made that my home and

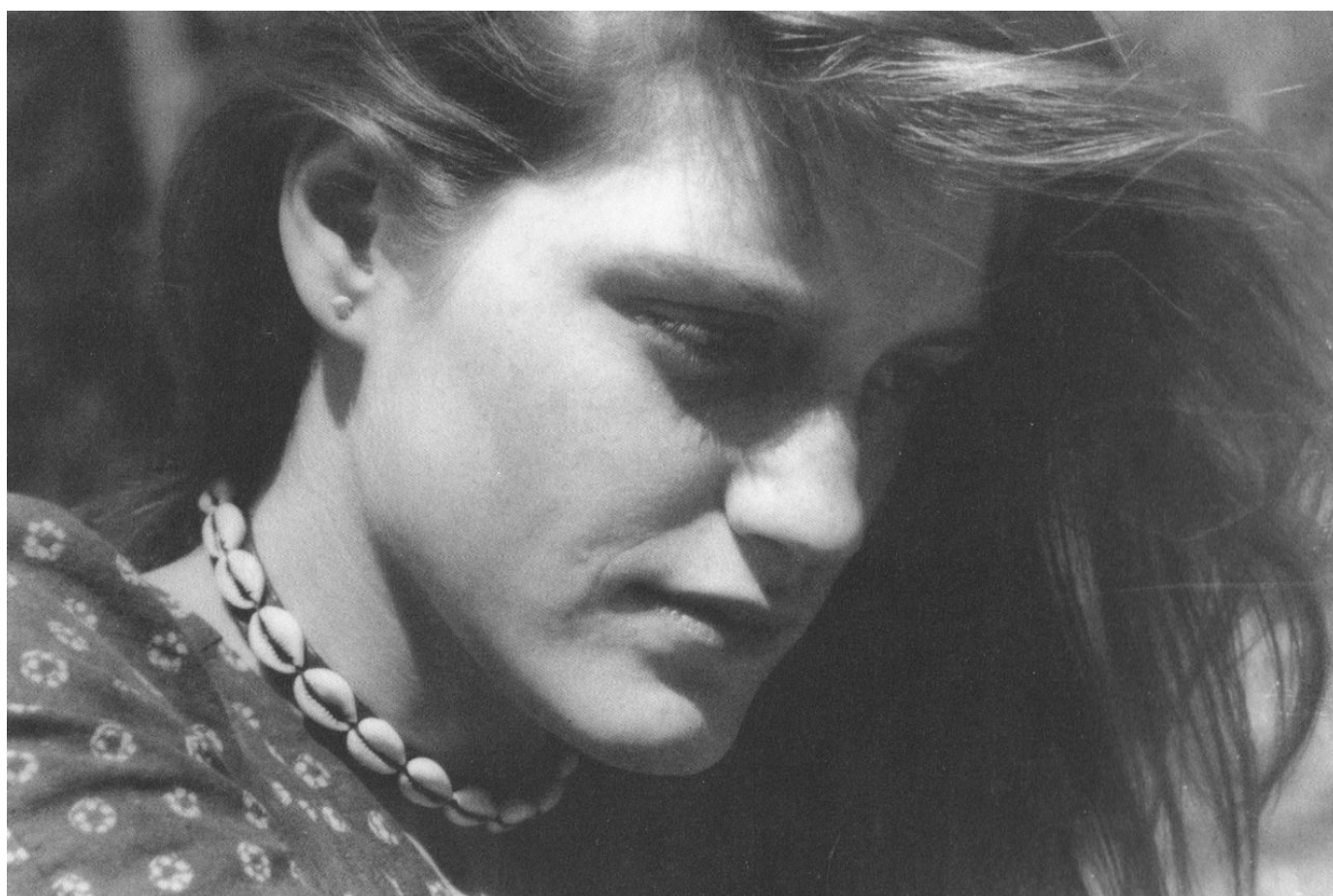
my family.”



Randy Neale. 1982 BUXTON YEARBOOK

The Globe Spotlight Team, in its ongoing investigation of abuses at New England private schools, found at least 15 instances of apparent retaliation against students who were sexually exploited by staffers or against employees who raised concerns about alleged sexual abuse and harassment. Some cases date back decades, while others are quite recent. But all of them are still raw for the people who felt the backlash.

The retribution, they say, came in various forms, including abusers lashing out at their accusers or enlisting other students to ostracize them, and administrators punishing or expelling students who complained of being victimized. At Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Waterbury, Conn., a fifth-grader who told officials a teacher had sexually assaulted her repeatedly in the early 1970s was forced to kneel and recite the “Hail Mary” prayer to atone, according to a 2010 lawsuit that was later settled.



Erika Schickel's senior photo. 1982 BUXTON SCHOOL YEARBOOK

Many of these retaliation allegations surfaced after the Globe [first reported](#) in December about a sexual abuse scandal at St. George's School in Rhode Island, where lawyers for victims say they have received credible allegations that nearly 50 alumni were sexually abused. Since then, at least 22 private schools in New England have launched investigations into sexual misconduct by staffers, many sparked by the Globe's reporting.

The troubles go way beyond St. George's. Since a May [investigation by the Spotlight Team](#) found 67 private schools in New England that had been touched by allegations of sexual misconduct by staffers over the past 25 years, scores of additional private school alumni and students have contacted the Globe to tell their stories. The count now stands at more than 100 schools, where more than 300 former students say they faced sexual abuse or harassment.

Many of these cases were not reported to authorities at the time, and the doubting, shaming, and alleged arbitrary punishment of some who report abuse may partly explain why. This pattern of reticence is consistent with a 2004 national study that found only 6 to 10 percent of students abused by educators report it to someone who can do something about it.

Retaliation cases can be ambiguous and tricky to prove. Abusers often seek out students with issues — such as family problems or learning disabilities — that make them insecure and more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Then, after their victimization, children and teenagers who suffer sexual abuse sometimes act out disruptively or develop substance abuse or psychological problems. That can lead schools to take disciplinary action against them for violations of school rules.

Particularly difficult are cases involving older teens, who may feel they are in consensual relationships with school staffers and may be of legal age.

Although some states, such as Connecticut, make it a crime for an educator to have sexual contact with a student regardless of age, many others do not. In Massachusetts, it's not illegal for an educator to have sex with a student, as long as the student is at least 16 and the relationship is considered consensual.

Even if the relationship is not a crime, schools still assume a duty to protect students from exploitation by staff members. But some institutions, the Globe review found, have responded to allegations of sexual exploitation by cracking down on the students, as if they were the wrongdoers.

A former student at the Emma Willard School in upstate New York recently went public with allegations that the school forced her to leave in 1998 after the 18-year-old — who had been having a sexual relationship with her soccer coach and history teacher — told officials the educator had gagged, bound, and raped her. A spokeswoman said the school fired the teacher that year and has hired a firm to investigate the allegations, which officials there take “very seriously.”

Many private schools do have policies for staffers that strictly prohibit sexual contact with students. The standard for schools should be unambiguous, said Peter Upham, executive director of The Association of Boarding Schools.

“For a teacher, coach, or other school employee to have sexual contact with a high school student, even if the student is legally of the ‘age of consent,’ is an egregious breach,” he said.

Upham said his group condemns retaliation against anyone who brings a good-faith allegation of educator misconduct.

“When directed against an abuse survivor, retaliation re-injures the victim,” Upham added. “When directed against a witness or other knowledgeable party, retaliation creates a new victim and suppresses future reporting of concerns.”

‘They were treating him as if he were the problem’

Students and school staff have both felt the pain of reprisals for reporting abuse. But it is the young who often bear the brunt: In 13 of the 15 cases reviewed by the Spotlight Team, the alleged retaliation was toward students.

In November 1994, officials at the Forman School in Litchfield, Conn., discovered that a married teacher, Susie Stiles, was having sex with a 16-year-old junior at Stiles’ apartment on campus. The headmaster of the school, which specializes in teaching students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, promptly [fired](#) Stiles and ordered her to stay away from the teenager. The school did not report her to police, though it was and is illegal in the state for a teacher to have sex with a student.

The teenager was distraught over the ousting of his teacher, according to the student’s parents. The boy ran away from school and, after a confrontation with police, was placed on suicide watch at a local hospital. When the teenager returned to Forman, things only got worse. Classmates taunted him, and the boy felt Stiles’ husband, also a teacher at Forman, glared at him every time they crossed paths, according to the student’s father, Michael, who requested that only his first name be used to protect his son’s identity.

The junior began getting into fights, including one with a student who had teased him about Stiles, Michael said. Just a month after Stiles was fired, records show, a school disciplinary board voted 3-to-2 to expel the junior.

When Michael picked up his son, he found the boy’s belongings dumped in trash bags in the hallway.

“They didn’t try to control the situation there,” Michael said. “Rather than see that he was a victim and should be treated as such, instead they were treating him as if he were the problem. They decided to wash their hands of him.”

Forman officials today say that an administrator who had agreed to monitor the boy after he was released from the hospital saw no signs of retaliation. “It was all pretty awkward,” Stiles’ now ex-husband told the Globe, but added, “The idea that I glared at him is absurd.”

The school now acknowledges that police should have been alerted about the abuse.

After the teenager was expelled from school — and against the wishes of his parents — the student followed Stiles and lived with her for a time in West Virginia, where she had moved and continued teaching. Stiles abruptly resigned from Jefferson County schools in February 1997. She told the Globe she decided not to teach any longer. Jefferson County school officials declined to comment on the terms of her departure.

Stiles, who now works with rescued animals and has changed her name, said in a phone interview that she was abused by a family member as a child and was going through a “difficult period” when she was at Forman, including struggles with alcohol.

“It was horrible,” she said, recalling the problems her former student faced at Forman after their relationship was discovered. “I would never intentionally hurt anyone.”

Look up details on a specific school

More than 100 private schools in New England have faced reports that their staff sexually abused or harassed students. Select a school from the dropdown menu below to explore the claims.

Select a school...



Note: If a school is not on this list and you think it should be, please email spotlight@globe.com or fill out [this short survey](#).

‘Mocked and humiliated’

Marje Monroe said she was simply doing what was asked of her.

A student at Stoneleigh-Burnham School had confided to friends that the acting head of the school, Paul Bassett, had touched her genitals through her clothing. In November 2007, the board of trustees asked Monroe, then the dean of students, to talk with the teenager. Monroe met with her, and the student tearfully told her story.

It was a delicate situation, according to several former administrators interviewed by the Spotlight Team. Stoneleigh-Burnham, an all-girls school in Greenfield, was in serious financial trouble, and a scandal involving the head of school could make matters worse.

Monroe thought she should report the accusations to state officials. But the school's attorney advised against it, according to Sharon Pleasant, Stoneleigh-Burnham's former director of admissions and a friend of Monroe.

"Marje was told not to call child protective services. She had to consider Paul's reputation and was told, 'We are talking about a man's career,' " Pleasant said.

Instead, Stoneleigh-Burnham placed Bassett on leave while an outside lawyer investigated. They "were interrogating me as if I did something wrong in telling someone about what happened," the student said, describing the lawyer's questioning.



A former administrator charged that Stoneleigh-Burnham School officials bullied her after she helped to investigate a sexual misconduct complaint against the acting head of school. DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Within weeks, the investigator informed the board that the evidence was inconclusive, according to Monroe's complaint. The school, in legal filings several years ago, said the charges were "unfounded."

Bassett returned to the job in January 2008, allegedly furious at Monroe. During his first meeting with the school's administrative team, Bassett "launched into an angry and abusive tirade" and said Monroe had "betrayed him and his career," according to a complaint Monroe filed with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.

The student, meanwhile, told the Globe she did her best to avoid Bassett the rest of the year.

For Monroe, the hostile treatment continued and widened to include faculty members who treated her rudely and organized a no-confidence vote, the complaint said. In

April, Monroe took a medical leave.

“I felt mocked and humiliated and did not feel I could sustain any further abusive treatment,” Monroe wrote in her complaint.

In June, school officials said she could not return as dean of students because she had failed to improve her job performance, just six months after they had offered to extend her contract.

Monroe immediately filed a [complaint](#), and the state’s commission against discrimination eventually found “sufficient evidence” to conclude that Monroe was subjected to unlawful retaliation. The two sides reached a confidential settlement.

Bassett, in a statement, confirmed there was an MCAD charge against him but said he could not discuss it. Though no longer head of school, he remained on staff as the school’s assistant softball coach, head coach of the public speaking and debate society, and director of a summer camp, “A Voice of Her Own,” according to Stoneleigh-Burnham’s website.

Head of school Sally Mixsell, who served as board chair during the 2007-2008 academic year, said the school “took appropriate steps to ensure a thorough investigation” of the allegations against Bassett: “Stoneleigh-Burnham takes any and all allegations of abuse of any kind seriously and makes every effort to respond swiftly, legally, ethically, and transparently.”

Monroe, who said she previously faced reprisals for reporting alleged abuse at an independent school in Florida, has learned hard lessons about the culture of private schools.

“In a boarding community, especially, it is very painful to admit that someone you live with, raise your children with, and work with could betray your community,” she said. “It becomes easier to blame the messenger for lying or causing the unease and

tension.”

‘No acknowledgment by the school’

Several students say the retribution they suffered went beyond bullying and expulsion: It involved physical violence and threats of public humiliation.

When a student at Webster Academy, a private school in Massachusetts, complained to the headmaster in the 1960s that a teacher tried to force the boy to perform oral sex, he said the headmaster slapped him, called him a liar, and expelled him. The school has since closed.

A former student at Middlesex School in Concord told the Spotlight Team that he was physically assaulted as a freshman by a teacher after resisting repeated sexual abuse. When the boy reported the misconduct to another instructor in the mid-1980s, he says the second teacher dismissed the complaint and the school later assigned the student to the alleged abuser’s class. Middlesex said it was unaware of the accusations at the time but has since launched an investigation. Both teachers denied the allegations.

At the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut in the 1980s, the headmaster threatened to tell a student’s parents that their son was a homosexual if the 15-year-old complained publicly that he had been raped by a staffer, according to a pending lawsuit filed by the former student. The school recently hired an outside investigator to look into those allegations and others.

But speaking out at all is rare. The vast majority of victims who contacted the Globe said they did not report the misconduct at the time. Years later, some students turned to the courts; the Globe found more than 100 legal claims and lawsuits filed by alleged victims of sexual misconduct across the region.

However, even when schools acknowledge the abuse by making financial settlements,

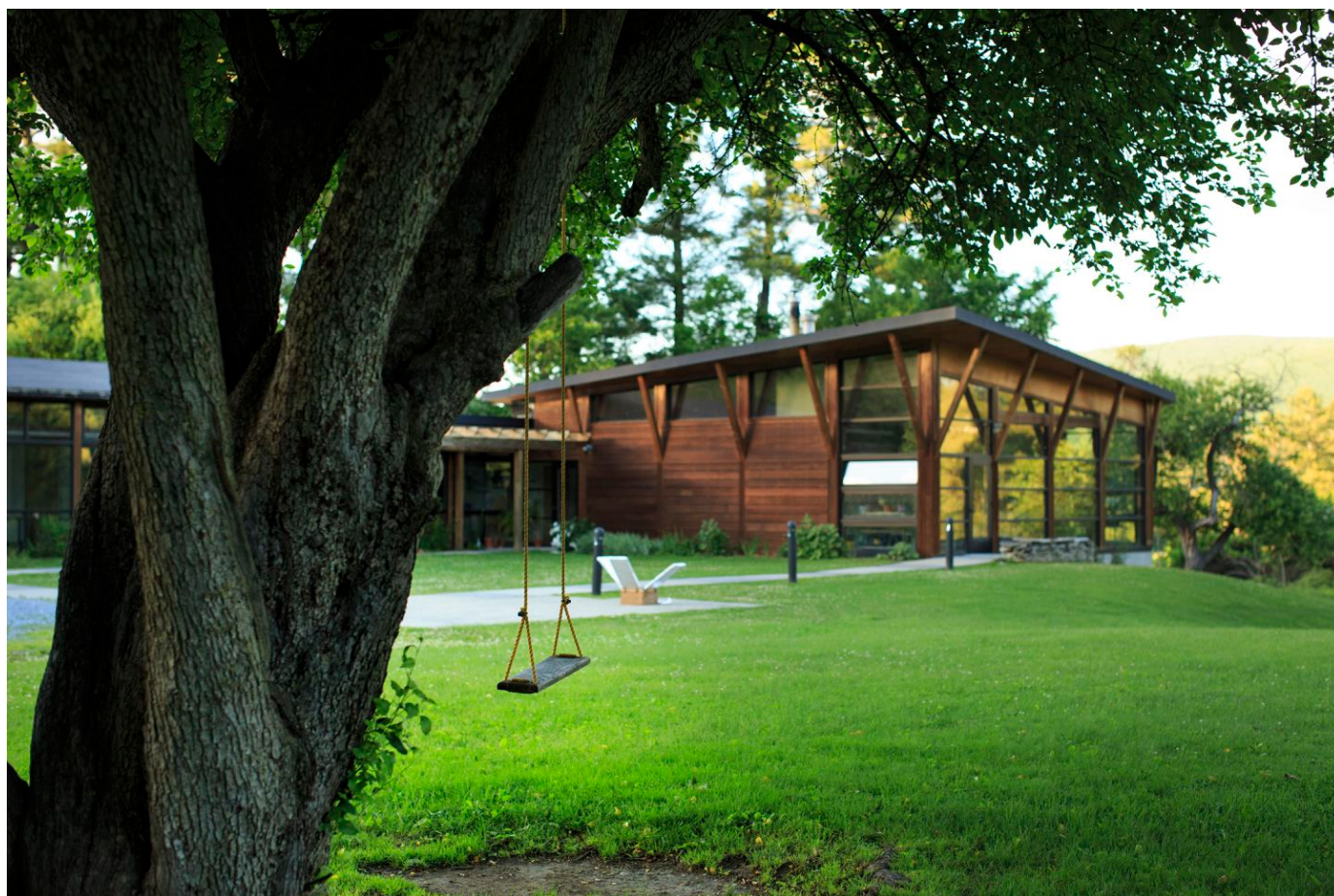
students are often silenced with gag orders that forbid them from talking about what they suffered or the settlement. At least seven institutions that settled claims of sexual misconduct signed agreements that included gag orders, including Phillips Exeter Academy, Milton Academy, Fessenden School, and Indian Mountain School.

Now some students are starting to defy those orders and speak out, including C.J. Bradaigh-Dallett. Bradaigh-Dallett and a group of other students have accused Christopher Simonds, a former teacher at Indian Mountain School, of sexually abusing them in the 1970s and 1980s at the Connecticut boarding school. At 13, after the abuse began, Bradaigh-Dallett attempted suicide.

Bradaigh-Dallett eventually filed a lawsuit against Simonds and Indian Mountain, but he agreed to settle after what he described as aggressive grilling by the school's lawyers. Simonds has since died. As part of the deal, the former student was prohibited from talking about the abuse. Several years later, in 1999, Bradaigh-Dallett attempted suicide again.

"It's a horrible story that needs to be told. There has been absolutely no acknowledgment by the school that great crimes occurred there," said Bradaigh-Dallett. "It's my narrative, and no one has ownership of it. And if they want to come after me, they will have to come out into the open and persecute me in front of the eyes of everyone."

'Everything I had been in that school was erased'



Officials at Buxton School in Williamstown dismissed a teacher and asked a student to leave after discovering the two had a relationship. DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Erika Schickel, the Buxton student who was asked to leave campus weeks before her graduation, said she is far angrier with the school than with Randy Neale, the instructor who initiated a sexual relationship in April 1982. (School officials would not talk for this article about the terms of Schickel's departure.)

Schickel said she thought she was in love with her teacher at the time. But now, as the mother of an 18-year-old daughter, she has come to regard the teacher's conduct, including a gushing [love letter](#) she saved, as an abuse of power.

A week after Schickel left the boarding school in the Berkshires, Neale picked up the teenager and brought her to live with him in Vermont, where he was teaching at nearby Bennington College. Neale, through his wife, recently declined to comment on his relationship with Schickel.

Several Buxton faculty members objected to Schickel's exile and pressured school leaders to allow the student to return to campus. They agreed, but with one condition — she had to stop seeing Neale.

Pilar Gale, a Buxton teacher and one of Schickel's closest mentors, traveled to Vermont to deliver the ultimatum. But for Schickel, it was too late. The damage was done. She did not return.

Some school officials even wanted to keep Schickel out of the senior yearbook. "The powers that be thought it would be inappropriate for her picture to be there, and a number of us said Erika is the victim and she shouldn't be treated as the villain," recalled Ed Gale, Pilar Gale's husband and a Buxton teacher at the time. Ultimately, her photo made it in.

Schickel's friends got their diplomas at graduation in June 1982. Days later, she said, Neale ended their relationship.

Bill Bennett, director emeritus at Buxton, said the administration did not resist including Schickel in the yearbook. Nonetheless, he said, the school feels responsible for the quality of every student's experience.

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equally the case with Erika."

Schickel, now a writer in Los Angeles, is writing about the experience in her second book, "The Big Hurt."

"Everything I had been in that school was erased," Schickel said. "It takes everything away from you. . . . It's not just something you get over and move on."

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