

Hanover-Horton School District Investigation

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Prepared for: Abbott, Thomson, Mauldin & Beer, PLC

Prepared by: Diane M. Fenby, GFB Services, L.L.C.

Allegation

Angela Campbell Strugill, a 1999 graduate of Hanover-Horton High School, states that Hanover-Horton teacher and coach, Johnnie Stewart, was sexually involved with her when she was a student. Ms. Strugill states that their relationship began shortly after she turned 16 and continued until she graduated.

Ms. Sturgill states that she had classes with Mr. Stewart throughout her high school years and that either in her sophomore or junior year she became his teacher aide. As Mr. Stewart's teacher aide, she spent time in his office which was adjacent to the boy's locker room and had a private bathroom. According to Ms. Sturgill whenever she was in the office with Mr. Stewart, the office door was closed and locked.

Ms. Sturgill states that their first kiss occurred when he drove her to a location in the Irish Hills known as the towers. She does not recall the specifics of their first sexual encounter but she is certain that it was not until after her 16th birthday. Ms. Sturgill recalls having sexual intercourse with Mr. Stewart at a trailer where he lived, at a location on Mosherville Road, at a location known as the sod farm on Thorne Road, and in a hotel room. Ms. Sturgill states that when they met to have sex, Mr. Stewart often provided alcohol which they both consumed.

Investigation

During the course of this investigation, I met with and talked to Hanover-Horton alumni, parents of current students, district employees and community members. A partial list of individuals that I talked with follows:

- John Denney, Superintendent, Hanover-Horton School District
- Angela Campbell Sturgill, Hanover-Horton High School Graduate and Complainant
- Kevin Sturgill, Hanover-Horton High School Graduate and husband of Angela Sturgill
- Isaac Cottrell, Principal Hanover Horton High School
- Matt Resor, Teacher Hanover Horton High School
- Denise Bergstrom, Principal Hanover-Horton Middle School
- Johnnie Stewart, Teacher/Coach Hanover-Horton High School
- Nancy Smith, Teacher at Hanover-Horton Schools
- Ron Kinch, Retired Hanover-Horton teacher, Athletic Director, and Principal
- Ron Hardy, Retired Assistant Principal
- Brian Brockie, Retired Teacher, Assistant Principal, and Athletic Director
- Dean Blackledge, former Athletic Director and current cross country coach
- Lindsey Meckley, graduate of Hanover-Horton High School
- Steve Meckley, father of Lindsey Meckley
- Nate VanEpps, 2000 graduate of Hanover-Horton High School
- Clyde VanEpps, retired Hanover-Horton coach

Over the last six weeks, I received numerous emails and telephone calls related to this investigation and when appropriate, I had follow-up conversations with these individuals either in person, by email or telephone. In addition, I attempted to contact any individual who was identified to me as someone who may potentially have information relevant to this investigation. Some of those that I talked with specifically requested not be to be identified and some provided information related to minor students who attend school in the Hanover-Horton district and therefore will not be named in this report.

In addition, I reviewed the following documents:

- Mr. Stewart's personnel file
- A redacted report regarding the investigation conducted by the Michigan State Police of Ms. Sturgill's complaint.
- A complaint filed by Mr. Stewart with the Jackson County Sheriff Department that included emails sent by Kevin Sturgill to Mr. Stewart, a note left on a vehicle of a bus driver and photos of Mr. Stewart's lawn that was damaged by a vehicle driving on it.
- A press release from the law firm Salvatore, Prescott & Porter outlining Angela Sturgill's complaint.
- Several articles published by the Jackson Citizen Patriot and Michigan Radio
- Screen shots of Facebook Instant messages sent by Kevin Sturgill to Johnnie Stewart and Ron Kinch.
- Copy of a page that Angela Campbell Sturgill's states is from her yearbook.

During the course of this investigation, it is my understanding that there has a great deal of conversation on several social medial platforms including Facebook, the MLive website, and Michigan Radio's website. I purposely did not include a review of social media in my investigation, however I did review any information from these sites that was provided directly to me.

Summary of Findings

Angela Sturgill states that she and Johnnie Stewart engaged in a consensual sexual relationship starting sometime after her 16th birthday and continuing through her senior year of high school. During this time, she was his student and his teacher aide. Mr. Stewart denies having a sexual relationship with Angela and states that he never met her outside of school.

During this investigation, I talked with and received emails from Hanover-Horton alumni from the graduating classes surrounding Angela's. The common theme among those who contacted me was that no one was surprised by Angie Sturgill's allegations and that it was well known that Angie and "Stew" (many students referred to Mr. Stewart as Stew) were a couple. Many of these graduates also shared that it was common to see Mr. Stewart at their parties and he often provided alcohol to students at these parties. Some also implied that the relationship between Angie and Mr. Stewart was also well known by school personnel, however, no one could provide any basis for this belief other than the students made no secret of it, so they assumed the school personnel also knew. Some stated that no one reported it because at the time because they did not see anything wrong with it, they felt Mr.

Stewart or Stew was one of them, included him in their social lives and treated him more as a peer than a teacher.

Susan Childs, a 1998 graduate, told me Mr. Stewart would bring a couple of cases of beer to a party and although he never handed it out directly to students, it was understood that it was there for them to drink.

Sara Maharas Plenta, a 2000 graduate, shared that she attended a party and saw Angie and Stew in the hot tub. Johnnie had his arm around Angie and they were making out. When Mr. Stewart saw her looking at them, he yelled "Maharas keep your mouth shut". However, Ms. Sturgill states that she does not recall this specific party or this incident and Mr. Stewart states that this did not occur.

A staff member from the school shared that one day after school there was a disturbance in the hallway. This individual and another employee stepped into the hallway and saw a student pounding on a door yelling about someone sleeping with his girlfriend. When the student saw them, he apologized and he said, "I am trying find my girlfriend and I'm pretty sure he is screwing her." The student left and a few minutes later the staff member observed Mr. Stewart and Angie Campbell coming out of the door that the student had been pounding on. I was told about another incident involving this same student and Mr. Stewart that resulted in the student being expelled, however I was not able to talk directly with this student. Although some staff remember the student, no documentation of the incident or his expulsion could be located. When I questioned Mr. Stewart about these incidents, he stated that he recalled the student however he did not remember either incident or the circumstances that led to the student's expulsion.

Angela Campbell provided me with a copy of a page from her senior yearbook. She states that she drew the line across the middle of the page and wrote "Spot Taken" to reserve this half page for Mr. Stewart to write in. She said that she waited until everyone else had signed her yearbook so he could write without being concerned about other students seeing what he wrote. This entry includes the following comments: "...here it is your senior year and I have been teasing you for four of them...Your class and in particular you represent the last of the students who get to me a great deal. I've grown quite found of you." It goes on to say, "It's no secret that you will always have a place in my heart. You mean far more to me than perhaps you know. It's NOT all talk...Follow your dreams & then find ME!!" I showed this page to Mr. Stewart and asked if he wrote the entry. He acknowledged that he recognized it and believes he wrote it as it appears to be his handwriting but he does not recall writing it and he would not have written the word "Love" that is written in the bottom right corner of the page because it is written in cursive and he does not write in cursive. I asked if he often wrote in students' yearbooks and he stated that he did not because it was "...like attending graduation open houses, if you attend one you have to attend them all or someone gets their feelings hurt."

Angela Sturgill claims that although no sexual activity occurred in Mr. Stewart's office, whenever she was in there with him the door was always closed and locked. When I asked Mr. Stewart about this, he stated that he has always had an open-door policy, meaning that if a student is in the office the door is open. Mr. Stewart's claim of maintaining an open-door policy conflicts with information provided by district employees. When I talked with Ron Hardy, he recalled that there was a time that he attempted to enter Mr. Stewart's office and the door was closed and locked. Mr. Hardy stated that when Mr.

Stewart opened the door nothing inappropriate was happening and the female student who was in the office with Mr. Stewart was on the other side of the room. Mr. Hardy recalled holding a staff meeting shortly after this where he specifically addressed his concerns about teachers being in their offices with students and having the door closed to Mr. Stewart and 2 other teachers (1 male and 1 female). Mr. Stewart states that he does not recall this incident or the staff meeting. Mr. Ron Kinch also told me that he spoke with Mr. Stewart about it being a bad practice to be in his office with students with the door closed. Mr. Stewart says that he does not recall this conversation with Mr. Kinch.

At some point after the gymnasium was renovated Mr. Stewart put the couch in his office. At the time fellow teacher, Karen Clark Abbott, commented about this to Mr. Stewart and expressed her concern that this was not appropriate. Mrs. Abbott recalls mentioning the couch in Mr. Stewart's office to Linda Brian, the superintendent. When I talked with Ms. Brian, although she did not recall specifically that Mr. Stewart had a couch in his office, she said that she "hates couches" in teachers offices and if she knew of it she would have had it removed as she specifically recalls having a couch removed from another teacher's office. An employee of the district's maintenance told me that the Superintendent had ordered the removal of the couch from Mr. Stewart's office. I asked Mr. Stewart if someone had removed the couch from his office at some point in the past and he said that it had been removed but he could not find out who had taken it or where it went. At some point after this Mr. Stewart replaced the couch because his current office has one. When I asked why he stated that he needs the seating as his office is often used for staff meetings (department, football coaches and players) and his office is often the hub for game officials.

During the early 1990's Mr. Stewart coached the girls' basketball team and then at some point began coaching boys' JV baseball. I was told by Dean Blackledge, the Athletic Director at this time, that after the girls' basketball team had only won 2 games in 2 years Principal Brian Brockie came to him and said that they needed to replace Mr. Stewart the following year. Mr. Blackledge also stated that the JV coaches were selected by the varsity coach for the sport and that they removed Mr. Stewart as the JV baseball coach upon the recommendation of Clyde VanEpps the varsity baseball coach. Some of the former students who contacted me stated that they were told Mr. Stewart was removed from being the girls' basketball coach because of his partying with the students. However, there is no record in Mr. Stewart's personnel file or elsewhere about these assignments or why he stopping these coaching assignments. Mr. Stewart stated that he did not recall why he stopped coaching these teams.

Nate VanEpps, a 2000 graduate, shared that he had dated an exchange student from Germany during his senior year. They broke up just before spring break but remained friendly and when he saw her crying one day, he asked what was wrong. She told him that Mr. Stewart had taken her to someplace to check out a modeling thing, that they had stayed in a hotel together and then showed Nate some photos that she said Mr. Stewart had taken of her laying on the hood of his truck. Nate confronted Mr. Stewart about this and asked him, "...why don't you leave high school girls alone?" About a week later Mr. Simpson asked Nate to step into his classroom and when he did, he found Mr. Stewart in the room. Mr. Simpson told him that Mr. Stewart needed to talk with him then left the room. According to Nate Mr. Stewart stated that he better not tell anyone about the stuff his former girlfriend had told him and that he would kick his ass if he did. Nate states that after that Mr. Stewart acted all buddy buddy and

said "...you understand I just need to make sure this stuff does not get out." Nate told me he never told anyone about this until several years later when during a conversation Mr. Stewart's name came up and he told his father what had occurred. Mr. Stewart denies that he took the exchange student anywhere, states that they did not stay in a hotel and that he did not take photos of her. He denies that Nate VanEpps confronted him about his relationship with this student and also denies that the conversation Nate says took place in Mr. Simpson's classroom ever took place.

During the course of the investigation it was brought to my attention that around the same time that Angela Sturgill is alleging they were having a sexual relationship Mr. Stewart had a current student and a recent graduate living with him. Some of the graduates from this era shared that they attended numerous student parties and bonfires at Mr. Stewart's home during this time. They also said that Mr. Stewart attended some of these parties and that he provided alcohol at some of them. Mr. Stewart acknowledged that Scott and Travis Spink, who at the time he was related to by marriage, did live with him for a while when he lived on Zorman Road in Napoleon, however he denies that there were any parties or bonfires held at his home and he denied ever providing alcohol to students.

In 2015 a junior, Lindsey Meckley, reported that Mr. Stewart had made a comment that made her uncomfortable. Lindsey initially talked with a teacher, then Denise Bergstrom, the middle school principal and ultimately Isaac Cottrell, the high school principal. Ms. Meckley states that Mr. Stewart approached her while she was sitting on the bleachers and commented that he could not wait until she turned 18 because of all he could legally do sexually with her. Ms. Bergstrom stated that she remembers that Lindsey told her that Mr. Stewart had said that he could not wait until she turned 18 and that Lindsey had taken the intention of the comment to be sexual but she does not recall if Lindsey told her the second part of the comment. Ms. Bergstrom said that she checked her files for her notes from her meeting with Lindsey but could not locate them so she believes she gave them to Mr. Cottrell when she turned the investigation over to him. Mr. Cottrell stated that when he met with Lindsey she told him that Mr. Stewart had said that he could not wait until she was 18 then Mr. Cottrell asked her what she thought Mr. Stewart had meant by that and Lindsey had said that she thought he meant he could not wait because of what he could do to her sexually. At the time this occurred it was finals week and school ended shortly after. Lindsey told me that she had received the grade she expected for the weight training class she had with Mr. Stewart and she did not want to cause problems for her senior year so the only action she wanted the school to take was for the school to replace him as her National Honor Society sponsor, which they did. When I asked Mr. Stewart about the incident with Lindsey Meckley, he told me that Lindsey had been coming late to her weight training class and leaving early. That her work ethic and time management were terrible and he expected more from her. He decided to try a different approach with her so he had her come to his office (door was open). He stated that he remembers exactly what he said to her. He told me he said, "How old are you, when do you turn 18?" Then after she replied when she would turn 18 he then said "I can't wait until you turn 18 so I can put you in a head lock and knock some sense into you." He said she had no reaction which was typical for Lindsey. The school has no written documentation of the complaint, the investigation or the actions taken so each individual was relying on their memory when discussing this situation with me.

As mentioned previously I was contacted by former students and parents of current students. Many of these were female graduates who shared comments Mr. Stewart had made to them directly or parents with daughters currently attending the district who shared what their daughters have told them.

Following is a partial list of the comments/situations that were reported to me:

- “You have an ass that a grown woman would die for.”
- When spotting a female student doing a squat with a heavy weight, Mr. Stewart whispered in her ear, “I could make your legs shake like that.”
- When dropping a paper off to Mr. Stewart’s office a female student states that he asked her in the presence of another male teacher, if she was a virgin.
- When instructing a female student who was lifting, “...don’t just lift the bar to here, lift it to your nipples...”
- When several female students were not doing something in class Mr. Stewart told them, “Go work on your booties, don’t all you girls want bigger booties”.
- Mr. Stewart had a female student who was wearing short gym shorts bend over in front of the class with her behind facing the class so he could use her back as a desk.
- Mr. Stewart contacted a student and told her he had an award for her but she needed to come to his home to pick it up.
- Mr. Stewart sent a text to a student inviting her to come over to his house because his wife was out of town and he was lonely.

I shared all of these comments and situations with Mr. Stewart and he denied ever saying or doing any of these things.

I also received emails and phone calls from individuals that shared the positive experiences that they had with Mr. Stewart as a teacher, coach and friend. Jessica Hull, a 2005 graduate, who served as Mr. Stewart’s teacher aide for 2 years stated that Mr. Stewart was a tough teacher, with high expectations of his students and that she never once felt uncomfortable or intimidated. Valerie Lashley shared that she feels that Mr. Stewart saved her son’s life by suggesting that they take him for a physical. Kyndra Irvine shared that she babysat for Mr. Stewart’s children, he was like a Dad to her and never made her feel uncomfortable or was inappropriate with her. Kelsey Lucas, had Mr. Stewart for class for four years and never once felt uncomfortable around him. Mr. Scott Koons shared that Mr. Stewart lived in his basement for several years around 1998-99 and he recalls that Mr. Stewart was in a serious relationship with a woman named Jenny and never brought any other woman to their home while living there.

Conclusions

At the time Mr. Stewart was hired he was provided a packet of policies, that included the District’s Sexual Harassment policy. Copies of these policies are included in Mr. Stewart’s personnel file. The policy which was in effect when Mr. Stewart was hired was approved by the Board on March 21, 1994. This policy has been updated over the years and updates distributed with the minutes of Board meetings which are distributed to employees via the District email system. The District’s Sexual Harassment policy states:

"It is the policy of this district to maintain a learning and working environment that is free from sexual harassment. No board member, staff member, or student of this district shall be subject to any form of sexual harassment or intimidation."

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded education programs and activities. School districts receiving federal financial assistance are required to comply with Title IX. Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination which is prohibited by Title IX. Guidance from the Office for Civil Rights states that "...in order for a school's grievance procedures to be consistent with Title IX standards, the school must use a preponderance of the evidence standard (i.e., it is more likely than not that sexual harassment or violence occurred)¹.

Reviewing all of the information provided during this investigation and using the prescribed preponderance of the evidence standard in this situation requires a conclusion that it is more likely than not that Johnnie Stewart engaged in a sexual relationship with Angela Campbell Sturgill when she was a student at Hanover-Horton High School. Further, given the information provided about Mr. Stewart's more recent statements and actions, it is likely that a sexually charged hostile environment presently exists within the school which is sufficiently serious that it denies or limits the ability of some students, specifically female students, to participate in or benefit from the educational program(s) offered by the district. Title IX requires the district to take immediate action to eliminate the harassment, prevent its recurrence, and address its effects. In addition to violating Title IX the investigation supports that the District's Sexual Harassment policy has also been violated on multiple occasions by Mr. Stewart's actions and statements.

This investigation did not reveal any occasions that alcohol was provided to students on school property or at school sponsored functions or that Mr. Stewart was under the influence of alcohol while at work or at a school sponsored event. However, it must be noted that this investigation did find evidence of Mr. Stewart providing alcohol to minor students at private events during the early years of his career at Hanover-Horton.

¹ Dear Colleague Letter, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Office of Civil Rights
Retrieved from: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg11.html