

'Victim of doubt': Sexual assaults often can remain secret

Woman reports 25-year-old Pullman kidnapping case may have involved sexual assault

By Hillary Hamm, Daily News staff writer

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Christine Wall said it can take years for a sexual assault victim to think about an incident in their past, let alone talk about it.

"There are many people out there that will never tell. They will keep it close and take it to the grave. That's not unusual," said Wall, executive director of Alternatives to Violence of the Palouse. "The shame involved in this crime, the way we look at victims of sexual assault, keep a lot of people in the dark for many, many years."

Pullman Police Cmdr. Chris Tennant said an Oregon resident reported Thursday that as a young Pullman girl in 1974 or 1975 she was picked up near Sunnyside Elementary School by a man who claimed he needed directions. After a drive, he dropped her off somewhere in the county.

Tennant said the woman claims the crime was reported to the Pullman Police Department soon after the original incident, but the woman is reporting it again because she said she withheld the fact that she was sexually assaulted.

Police have no record of the case, Tennant said, and it likely was removed from the system because of inactivity, especially since it was not originally classified as a rape.

Tennant said a statute of limitations would apply on the case regardless: sex crimes can now be prosecuted up to seven years after the incident, and even longer depending on the age of the victim.

Still, 25 years is a long time - even with new information.

"Really, all we can do at this point is document the fact and leave it at that," he said. "Due to the time lag, I don't think there's very much that can be done."

Wall wouldn't speculate on the woman's situation, but said myths about sexual violence - such as an assault was the victim's fault, or that they were lying in their report - and

relatively little community awareness and resources were present 25 years ago may have played a part in her delayed report.

She may also have been a victim of doubt.

"When kids do report, if there is disbelief or a move to blame them - that they're 'bad kids' - the story moves away from the sexual assault. That's a strong message to the child not to report again," she said. "Many children aren't believed because the crimes are overwhelmingly perpetrated by someone we know and trust."

Wall said the general public is more savvy these days when it comes to protecting children, and parents are more prone to question people like day-care providers, teachers and coaches.

Regardless, victims of all ages often choose to push the memory of sexual assault out of their minds.

Calling a hotline - such as those offered through ATVP - and working with a therapist can help. Wall stresses that the most important thing for victims is talking to someone they can trust.

"There are opportunities to share in a safe way that may help to start looking at your experience and move forward from it," she said.

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