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NEWS

Iowa men accused of sexual misconduct ousted from advocacy group, state agency for blind people

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When Katy Olsen was 20, she won her first scholarship to attend a national convention of the National Federation of the Blind in Orlando, Florida.

The opportunity — afforded to students across the country who excel in academics, community involvement and leadership — meant she would be in the running for a college scholarship ranging from \$3,000 to \$12,000 and a chance to represent Iowa in the nation's oldest and largest organization serving blind Americans.

But beginning that week in 2016, the Madrid, Iowa, native said she experienced something similar to what many other blind and low-vision women have come forward to say happened after they became involved with the nationwide nonprofit.

It began with a new friend and mentor she'd met the year before becoming increasingly controlling and touchy, making her feel uncomfortable. The longtime member, Jerad Nylin, would become president of Iowa's affiliate of National Federation of the Blind later that October.

"He constantly reminded me that I would not be at the convention as a finalist if it wasn't for him, because he was the one who pushed me to apply for it," said Olsen, who won a \$5,000 scholarship that year.

Olsen said she rejected Nylin's advances and attempts to kiss her at another national federation seminar in Washington, D.C., in 2017. And she tried to avoid him at the federation's next national convention in Orlando the same year — until Nylin asked her to come to his hotel room one night to meet some new friends.

After they left, she said, Nylin pressured her to stay and assaulted her, “pushing me back, kissing me, trying to put his hand down my pants,” she said.

Other incidents — groping and touching at times when other blind people in their presence couldn’t be aware — would happen at other gatherings over the next two years, she said.

Olsen filed a complaint with the organization in 2018. She also discussed with Iowa federation leaders in 2019 uncomfortable behavior by Michael Harvey, an older federation member and co-worker at the Iowa Department for the Blind, although she did not file a formal complaint. She said he got too close to her and touched her during a department gathering the same year.

Harvey, the subject of other complaints from female employees, was fired in March 2020, state records show.

“But that time in the hotel room was the time I felt the most attacked,” Olsen said.

Nylin, who did not return phone and Facebook messages seeking comment, voluntarily resigned his position as head of the Iowa affiliate in November 2018, after a three-person panel assembled by the national federation investigated Olsen’s formal code-of-conduct complaint.

His membership in the national federation was suspended, and he was told to refrain from contacting Olsen, according to the letter national federation President Mark Riccobono sent to Olsen outlining the panel’s decision.

“He has been advised that if further credible complaints arise, he may be subject to expulsion from the organization if the complaints are verified,” Riccobono wrote.

Olsen, a former University of Iowa student and youth counselor at the Iowa Department for the Blind who now attends college in Ruston, Louisiana, has since learned of numerous recent allegations of sexual misconduct in connection with the National Federation of the Blind, its affiliated training and rehabilitation programs, and its state affiliates, including the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa.

Emboldened by the MeToo movement, blind women across the country, who have relied on the federation’s advocacy, funding, programming and services to have more independent lives, have taken to Facebook and Twitter to report their encounters of sexual

assault, groping and sexual harassment, using #MarchingTogether.

Amid the disclosures, a group of more than 500 survivors and supporters signed an open letter in December demanding action from the Baltimore-based National Federation of the Blind and the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board in Ruston.

The letter said those who have come forward have suffered retaliation, alienation and “serious damage to personal and professional relationships and reputations.”

Stacy Cervenka, a Lincoln, Nebraska, public policy expert for the blind and member of the national federation until 2018, helped circulate the open letter after she said leaders at the national organization, including Riccobono, failed to address widespread reports of problems more than two years ago.

Married to a supervisor at the Nebraska Commission for the Blind, Cervenka became involved after she said a man who had been fired twice for sexual misconduct received promotions despite being reported to the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board.

Since then, Cervenka said, she has collected dozens of stories of rape, groping, harassment and assault from women who attended federation training centers, conventions and other events.

The stories have led to ongoing discussions on social media about how little has changed over a period of decades in an insular community where federation-sponsored conventions, training programs and gatherings are focal points of socialization for young blind and low-vision people.

Members have complained that men have received little training or guidance on sexual behavior, while women have been encouraged to be passive or silent about widespread groping, harassment or even rape. Many have commented on Facebook about the difficulty of trying to expose deeply rooted problems within a member-led organization that so many people rely on. Others have lashed out at those who have spoken up in support of women who have told their stories.

“I honestly thought that things would be handled if victims would just tell leaders and tell training center directors.,” Cervenka wrote on her Facebook page. “... I came to know that leadership at the highest levels of NFB knew that this was a huge problem.”

'I'm hoping to see justice for survivors'

The widespread allegations also have created a firestorm of controversy for a national advocacy and watchdog nonprofit that has sued universities, retailers, software companies and other organizations for discriminatory practices on behalf of blind and low-vision Americans.

Cervenka said she wants the organization to stop burying accusations from women, weed out abusers who remain in the federation's ranks and take meaningful steps to stop sexual misconduct.

"I'm hoping to see justice for survivors," she said. "I'm hoping those who have perpetrated abuse will be relieved of their positions. I'm hoping those in national leadership will face consequences for all the covering up and the silencing."

Last month, Riccobono wrote a long letter of apology to the federation's membership, saying he had made many mistakes and accepted responsibility.

"I am profoundly sorry that anyone has been harmed by experiences in our movement," he wrote. "As a husband, father of three children, and leader who tries to live by a strong set of ethical values, I hurt for the survivors, and I deeply regret that I have made mistakes along the way."

Riccobono said the campaign to expose sexual misconduct prompted the national federation this month to form a task force of survivors and engage a national anti-sexual violence organization to train its membership and rework its code of conduct. The organization also is working to enhance its reporting practices and training.

But Cervenka, Olsen and other women say the organization and its affiliates continue to retain members who have been accused of sexual assault and other misconduct, including some in leadership roles.

Nylin, who lives in Iowa City, was reinstated at the Iowa affiliate last year after a year's probation and was invited to serve on a state nominating committee to elect new board members.

Olsen said she never received any notice of his reinstatement. But when she talked with Iowa affiliate president Scott Van Gorp in emails and over Zoom, she said, he told her the national federation was responsible for reinstating Nylin.

That decision was made even though Janae Peterson, a member since high school who currently works at Iowa State University, told the federation that she also was sexually assaulted and harassed by Nylin in the same year as Olsen's report.

Peterson said she had known Nylin for years and tended to dismiss his questionable behavior until the summer of 2018, when she said he tried to grab her genitals beneath her shorts while the two were at Johnny's Hall of Fame, a downtown Des Moines sports bar.

Peterson, 31, said she wasn't aware of Olsen's complaint until the code of conduct panel contacted her in fall 2018 during its sexual misconduct investigation.

She said the group sent her a letter after hearing about her case and asked her to outline what happened. But she said the outreach seemed very process-driven and lacking in any concern for what had happened to her.

At that point, she said, she decided not to take part in that investigation.

But she said she later contacted state and national leaders about her case, expressing great disappointment at the way they had gone about trying to investigate Nylin.

In a November 2018 letter to Riccobono, she said she had declined to make a written statement because she feared it would be shared with Nylin, as happened in Olsen's case.

"In the past month, I have learned a lot about our organization's history regarding sexual misconduct. If we make victims think twice about coming forward by requiring them to write long letters, relive their experiences in writing, and then send that information to the accused, it will send the message to predators that sexual harassment is acceptable, tolerable, and easily dismissed," she wrote.

Riccobono replied to her in an email, saying he would reflect on what she wrote and "will take the actions that I believe best serve the members of our organization and creating the culture that we want to have in the future. I hope that you might be willing to take a moment to consider that my intention in this process might actually come from a place of love."

Riccobono declined to comment on any specific sexual misconduct allegation. In a statement to Watchdog, he said:

"The National Federation of the Blind has a zero tolerance for abusive or violent behavior of any kind. Last week we announced a comprehensive program, in addition to our

existing Code of Conduct internal review process. This includes an on-going partnership with RAINN, the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, to assist us in furthering a safe, inclusive, and welcoming culture as part of all our programs and activities, as well as a survivor-led task force to help advise and guide our efforts.”

Peterson has since posted her story on Facebook. She said it makes her angry the federation reinstated Nylin and put him in another leadership committee position in Iowa.

“I was a pretty prominent member, serving on some of the federation’s national boards. So it’s not like I was a nobody,” she said. “No one has invited either (Olsen or me) to be a part of things again, but they will call Jerad.”

Lynn Bailiff, a longtime federation member living in Baltimore, said she got involved in the movement because she believes the federation’s scholarship structure has for decades made students vulnerable to more powerful members and mentors who might take advantage.

A former national scholarship committee member, she said students who attend the national convention are beholden to those who mentor them at conventions because those mentors have sway over the size of their college scholarships.

Bailiff, 51, said she experienced an incident similar to what Olsen said happened to her when she was 17, attending a national federation convention.

Bailiff said she also met the man in his hotel room and he told her he would help get her a college scholarship if she slept with him. She refused him.

She said she reported the man, and he was kicked off the federation’s scholarship committee “in a fairly public way.”

So she was flabbergasted when he was later allowed to rejoin the national federation's scholarship committee in the late-1990s, when she was also a member, she said.

“I was told he had grown out of it, so they had put him back on,” she said.

Riccobono declined to comment on the allegation.

Bailiff said the man she reported — whom she did not want to name publicly — has been working for the national federation on alleged sexual misconduct cases for years.

Emails related to sexual misconduct cases and the federation's tax filings show he

continues to work for the federation.

Two Iowa Department for the Blind workers fired

Those who signed the open letter have demanded the national federation put in place by Aug. 31 clear policies to “swiftly and thoroughly investigate allegations.” They also want to ensure victims don’t lose services or funding or get kicked out of programs after reporting accusations.

They have asked that perpetrators be removed from their jobs at local rehabilitation centers or any leadership posts in the organizations.

Iowa women say they also have reported sexual misconduct to the Iowa Department for the Blind, which often partners with the National Federation of the Blind and its affiliates with programming.

Since August 2019, two department employees who have been accused of sexual misconduct — Harvey and Michael Hoing — have been fired, state records obtained by Watchdog show.

Hoing could not be reached for comment. Reached by phone, Harvey said he would have to call Watchdog back, but did not.

Olsen, now 24, said she discussed Harvey's behavior with Van Gorp, the current president of the Iowa affiliate of the national federation, telling him she believed Harvey should be monitored because she knew he had been accused of harassing other women as well.

At that point, she said, Van Gorp told her the only way action could be taken was to file another formal code of conduct complaint to the national federation.

“But I had just done that process the year before with (Nylin). That was traumatizing, and I didn’t want to do it again,” she said.

She said she stepped down last fall as second vice president of the state affiliate after Harvey was tapped by a nominating committee to become first vice president last fall.

She said she told Van Gorp she would have to work closely with Harvey, and she did not feel safe.

“But he kept saying the past is in the past, and we have to keep moving forward,” she said.

“But that’s not possible when you’ve been through trauma like this.”

Niah Howard, 29, a former Department for the Blind employee who is also a student now at Louisiana Tech University, said she is one of the people who made formal complaints about Harvey’s inappropriate behavior.

She did so in early summer 2019, she said, after participating in blindness immersion training at the Iowa Department for the Blind’s orientation center in Des Moines.

In the complaint to the National Blindness Professional Certification Board, Howard said Harvey, her braille and technology instructor, asked if he could demonstrate how to track a line of braille by touching her shoulders and back during one of her lessons.

“He proceeded to track his fingers across my back. It felt inappropriate to me, but as a new professional in the field, I was not certain of this,” Howard wrote.

She said she later spoke with another instructor in the training center a few weeks later and was told that the behavior was inappropriate.

“I spoke with (Emily Wharton), director of the Iowa Department for the Blind about the incident, and again it was confirmed that this had been inappropriate behavior of an instructor and she encouraged me to report the incident to the Department of Administrative Services.”

Harvey wasn’t removed from his position as president of the Des Moines chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa until it began a formal code of conduct investigation into several complaints in December 2020. He was first vice president of the state affiliate until October.

Wharton, director of Iowa’s Department for the Blind, said: “Unfortunately, our attorney says we are not able to release the reason for Michael Harvey’s termination.”

But Wharton did confirm that Michael Hoing, a summer worker at the department, left the department in 2019 after a state Department of Administrative Services sexual harassment complaint against him was deemed founded.

Wharton said she wished she “could legally say more” about reports of sexual misconduct within the department, but that she could not elaborate on specific reports.

However, she said, all complaints are referred to the Department of Administrative

Services and investigated. All of the complaints the department has received involved employees, she said.

"I can tell you we've taken complaints very seriously," she said. "As a rule or as a policy, we do act on them."

On Jan. 13, Van Gorp sent the following message to all members of the federation's affiliate in Iowa:

"In light of recent events within the blindness community and discussions surrounding the Code of Conduct, several members throughout the affiliate have approached me and other leaders with questions that I would like to address at this time. The questions have surrounded allegations regarding one specific individual in the affiliate.

"After coordinating with our national president earlier this week, I am sharing the following information in an effort to be as transparent as possible. A grievance has been filed under the Code of Conduct of the National Federation of the Blind against Michael Harvey. This grievance is still going through the Code of Conduct process, and I have not received any additional information. In the meantime, Michael has been advised not to participate in Federation activities while this grievance is pending.

"In addition, you may see stories in media outlets throughout the country and here in Iowa. We are not commenting on any specific individuals or incidents.

"We in the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa stand with survivors and are doing everything we can to prevent incidents from happening to others while ensuring a safe space for survivors' voices to be heard. We support the efforts of the survivor task force and look forward to the changes that will be implemented by our national organization in partnership with RAINN as well as from recommendations from the task force.

"In the meantime, as President Riccobono alluded to in his Presidential release on January 4, we need to keep moving forward while continuing to deal with these issues in a compassionate and constructive manner. I look forward to seeing where we go from here. Let's consider where we've been, look at where we are now, and continue to look forward to the future to put these issues behind us and make the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa a safe place for all. To borrow the title of a recent newsletter, Federation Forward!"

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