

Civic leader accused of sex abuse

1990s Ex-PDC chairman Matt Hennessee paid for a teen relative's counseling after others heard her allegations

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Matt Hennessee, a pastor, civic leader and recently departed chairman of the Portland Development Commission, was accused of sexually abusing an underaged female relative more than a decade ago, according to interviews, documents and law enforcement records.

Prosecutors declined to press charges in 1993 because Hennessee, the teenager and her mother refused to cooperate. But in recent interviews and a signed statement to The Oregonian, the woman, now 29, says Hennessee abused her "several times per week" from age 12 or 13 to 16

Documents obtained by the newspaper include e-mails Hennessee sent to the woman in 2003 admitting sexual abuse, a police report on the investigation and an attorney case file that documents a settlement in which Hennessee paid for the girl's counseling.

Hennessee left the city's urban renewal agency on July 27 at the end of his three-year term. A former Nike executive, he now leads Quiktrak, a Beaverton technology firm, and serves as pastor at a North Portland church. He came to Oregon in 1988 at the request of future Gov. Ted Kulongoski to oversee the state workers' compensation system.

He considered running for mayor in 2004. More recently, friends and supporters have suggested he challenge U.S. Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., in 2006.

In a July 26 interview, Hennessee, 46, said describing his conduct with the girl as sexual would be "very, very mischaracterized." He declined to answer direct questions about whether he had sex with her.

In a written statement to The Oregonian late last month, Hennessee apologized for what he called "my inappropriate exposure and poor judgment," without explaining what that meant. He also said former relatives were out to destroy his reputation.

The woman said she declined to cooperate with authorities as a teenager because she cared for Hennessee and hoped to protect him.

She said she agreed to come forward now because Hennessee remains in trustworthy positions, and his recent statements suggest he hasn't accepted responsibility for his actions or their impact.

"Mr. Hennessee was a trusted and important figure in my life," her statement says, "and he violated the trust I placed in him."

The Oregonian began researching Hennessee's background this summer for a story about his life and career, his tenure atop the Development Commission and his future plans.

Reporters learned of the sexual abuse allegations in late July from a source outside the family. Public records from the Multnomah County district attorney and the Portland Police Bureau indicate there was a 1993 investigation.

On July 26, Hennessee said he had not heard of that investigation. "What happened was a private family issue, period," Hennessee said then.

The woman initially declined to talk to reporters about Hennessee. When told of Hennessee's responses, she changed her mind. She also provided records on the case.

The Oregonian does not publish the names of sex abuse victims without their consent, and is not publishing the name of the woman or her exact relationship to Hennessee to protect her identity. The woman, who lives in the Portland area and is married with young children, said she is willing to testify in court to the truth of her statement.

The police report, obtained in late September, and a letter Hennessee's lawyer sent to police indicate that Hennessee knew about the allegations. He spoke with a state child abuse investigator, the report says, and had a lawyer talk to police on his behalf.

In his October statement, Hennessee did not address why he originally told reporters he had not heard of the investigation.

The woman also provided two e-mails that she says Hennessee sent in January 2003, after she decided to break off contact with him. In the

long missives, Hennessee apologized twice for sexually abusing her, adding that he "never sexually abused anyone before you and never have since then."

"I would give my life to re-live and do it differently where you're concerned," he said in the first e-mail. "I apologize for abusing you sexually."

He later added: "While I respect and appreciate your protection of me, I hope you know it makes me feel no less guilty about what I did to you and has been the catalyst for me to make sure (to) leave this life never, ever doing something so horrible again."

Hennessee, who was about 29 to 33 at the time of the alleged abuse, did not dispute the e-mails. In his statement, he said he does not "begrudge anyone for sharing with you private and privileged e-mails." He said they were written "with the intent of aiding our healing process."

After the July interview, Hennessee refused repeated requests to talk further with reporters.

In his recent statement, Hennessee did not elaborate on either the events of 12 years ago or why relatives would be out to get him, saying that doing so would "open a gate of mutually resolved disagreements and counter accusations."

"With God's help, I sought forgiveness, reconciliation and healing many years ago for the issues within my ex-family which stemmed from my childhood and other trauma . . . ," he wrote. "I refuse to be a part of rehashing the details of this issue or my version of this matter in the media."

State, police investigate

The report Portland police compiled gives the following account from investigators and the people they interviewed:

Hennessee's relative, then 16, went to a school counselor in 1992 to report that she was being sexually abused and feared the abuse was about to escalate.

The counselor called Child Protective Services, which launched an investigation. In March 1993, someone sent authorities a separate, anonymous note accusing Hennessee of abuse. That triggered a separate police investigation.

The lead detective on the case called the teenager and her mother, who both would not talk. The report says he also left a message on Hennessee's work phone at Nike.

Portland lawyer Philip Lewis called back on Hennessee's behalf several days later. The attorney said Hennessee "was unwilling to discuss the situation with the police," the report says. Lewis also sent a letter to police saying Hennessee was exercising his constitutional right to remain silent and to not provide evidence against himself -- the standard approach he recommends for clients accused of sex abuse, according to Lewis' Web site.

The Police Bureau forwarded its file to the Multnomah County prosecutor. But records say the district attorney's office declined to charge Hennessee because the girl "did not wish to prosecute."

According to the police detective, the teenager told the state investigator that the abuse lasted 18 months, from age 14 1/2 to 16. She said Hennessee fondled her breasts and genitals and had her touch his genitals through his pants, the report says.

Today, the woman says the abuse also included oral sex and genital contact short of penetration, and began when she was 12 or 13, not 14 1/2.

She says she was trying to protect Hennessee by downplaying the severity of the abuse to the school counselor and the state investigator. She didn't realize the school counselor would report the abuse allegation to the state.

"I just needed to talk about it with someone," she said recently. "I felt afraid and alone, and I knew I needed help."

File documents payment

The woman says the abuse stopped after she first spoke with her school counselor and a state child abuse worker became involved.

Soon after, lawyers for the girl and Hennessee began negotiating a private settlement, she said.

Mark Austin Cross, the teenager's attorney at the time, told The Oregonian that Hennessee promised to distance himself from the girl, pay her therapy and legal bills, and attend counseling himself. She promised not to sue him or seek criminal prosecution.

Cross' file on the case includes several letters he wrote to Lewis requesting Hennessee's payment for the woman's counseling and letters from Lewis transmitting the payments.

The woman gave Cross permission to speak with reporters. Lewis, Hennessee's attorney then, declined to discuss the case.

Hennessee remained a part of the woman's life for another decade. He interacted with her, her husband and children, she said, and gave them up to \$8,000 for a down payment on a house.

She decided to break off contact with Hennessee in 2003. In e-mails to him, she wrote that she was wary of him spending time alone with her children. She said recently that she finally had realized she did not have to maintain contact with him.

Hennessee paid for her to attend counseling for three years, she said, starting when she was 16. Since then, she says she has been in therapy off and on.

The woman said she still lives with psychological pain from the abuse, but has a happy marriage and happy children. The statute of limitations on the charge prosecutors were considering has expired, and the woman and her mother both said they will not sue Hennessee.

"I am aware that Mr. Hennessee has also suffered in life, and I feel compassion for him," the woman wrote in her statement. "However, if Mr. Hennessee is not willing to speak truthfully about what happened to me, then I am concerned that he has not profited from his counseling or realized how damaging sexual abuse is for children."

Rise to public service

In his written statement, Hennessee mentions the difficulty of his childhood. Before the abuse allegations surfaced, he told The Oregonian that his early struggles shaped his commitment to public service.

Hennessee's 16-year-old mother gave him to an orphanage just after he was born in 1959 in Columbus, Ohio. He spent his first three years in braces to correct deformities in his hands and feet.

At age 7, his foster mother died in a car accident, sending him back to the orphanage and then to a second foster home, a period he described in earlier interviews as "the hardest time of my life."

Hennessee was 9, he says, when he memorized Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. In the sixth grade, he told his teacher he wanted to be president someday. Classmates elected him student body president at Oberlin College in Ohio, then he took a series of government leadership jobs.

In 1988, he came to Oregon under then-Gov. Neil Goldschmidt and insurance commissioner Kulongoski to run the state Workers' Compensation Division.

He moved on in 1990 to become a Nike executive, and in 1999 he left to run Quiktrak, where the company's owners credit him with tripling revenues and creating an open and warm culture. Today his friends include Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Coretta Scott King and her eldest daughter, Yolanda.

This spring, Hennessee was chosen to head the Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church in North Portland after 16 years as an assistant pastor at a nearby church. Congregation members say he has revitalized the church and increased attendance with his inspirational and energetic preaching style. He married for the second time in May.

His time leading the Portland Development Commission featured some dramatic successes -- including helping to shepherd through the South Waterfront development. But he also drew criticism that he allowed a culture of free-spending and insufficient public involvement on controversial projects such as the renewal of the Burnside Bridgehead Redevelopment area.

In November 2004, Kulongoski appointed Hennessee to a four-year term as a policyholder representative on the board of Saif Corp., the

state workers' compensation insurer. He resigned on Aug. 19, telling the agency that his company had switched to a different workers' compensation insurer.

Hennessee's friends and colleagues say he has an uncanny ability to inspire people, connect across races and look on the bright side of any situation. They compare his political potential to that of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill.

Hennessee, who like Obama is African American, has said that many blacks think their leaders are targeted by the news media and the powers-that-be: "There's a feeling that every time one emerges, he's always going to get hit hard."

In an earlier interview, he said his worst mistake in life was fathering a son out of wedlock when he was 26. He said his strong faith also stemmed from his difficult childhood.

Religion "recognizes that a lot of people are hunkered down, stalled in their lives, because of the things they have done," Hennessee said, describing the appeal of church.

"Christ forgave Saul. Even when the disciples asked, 'How many times must I forgive?' he says you've got to keep on forgiving people, giving them a chance."

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