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Mother of CAHS Student Breaks Silence on Bruce Smith Abuse, Alleges Failures by School and DHS Officials

A mother recounts how officials ignored her reports of Bruce Smith's inappropriate behavior during a 2019 school trip, leaving her son and others vulnerable to further harm. Her account reveals a troubling lack of accountability and support for students

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The Charlotte Amalie High School

“It's been six years but it's still fresh, reliving the whole situation,” the woman said, her voice shaking with emotion. “I was gaslighted by adults,” argued the mother of a boy who was assaulted by [convicted child molester Alfredo Bruce Smith](#).

Finally breaking her silence, the woman spoke to the Consortium on Thursday, recounting how she – and others – alerted officials at the Charlotte Amalie High School and the Department of Human Services that something terrible had seemingly happened to her son during a school trip to Puerto Rico.

After initial promises of a thorough investigation, the woman – whose identity is being withheld to protect the victim – said her hopes of finding out the truth were dashed when these officials instead closed ranks to protect the man who is now serving a 35-year sentence for his crimes against minor children.

“I know Mr. Edwards personally, you know. I worked with him before, and to know he did that to me really hurt me,” the mother lamented, naming then-principal Alcede Edwards as one of the officials who failed to act according to local laws governing the mandated reporting of suspicions of child neglect or abuse.

The first red flag came even before members of the CAHS track and field team left for Puerto Rico in March 2019, the woman said. It reportedly came to her attention that her son would have been sharing a room with Mr. Smith. “The child was uneasy from the jump of being in the room,” she told the Consortium. However, when she inquired about the rooming arrangements, she said the longtime track coach became indignant. “He went on like a maniac,” she recounted. “Then he was like, ‘Oh no, no, no, no, he's gonna be okay, he's in good hands.’”

Somewhat mollified, the woman said she reassured herself that things would be okay. Even before the trip was over, though, she learned from her son that things were far from alright. He called her from Puerto Rico to tell her that he had had to escape the room that he was sharing with Mr. Smith. “He just told me something happened, and what happened, this gentleman can go to jail.” However, the boy did not want to go into detail at the time, reportedly telling his mother that they would discuss the issue upon his return.

The distraught mother said she did not wait, however, and composed an email to Principal Edwards immediately. She called him right after that, “and he asked me to come in directly.” On Monday, March 11 2019, she sent the email she had written the day before, and then both parents went down to meet with Mr. Edwards.

Instead of immediately turning over the matter to the relevant authorities as required by law, “he told us that he will perform a full investigation,” the mother said. “After we left that meeting, we were really convinced, and we were hopeful that we would get to the bottom of it.” She said that Mr. Edwards asked them to speak to their son in the hopes of finding out more information about what had transpired in Puerto Rico. However, once the child found out that his parents had alerted school officials, “my son kind of clammed up,” she said.

Nevertheless, the mother was determined to get answers. Having previously called the Family Resource Center, who directed her to either the Department of Human Services or the police, after her first meeting with the CAHS Principal, the woman decided to call DHS. “I called Human Services and I explained. I said ‘hey, my son was in a room alone with this guy.’” She was reportedly connected with Clarence Payne. When she related the few details she knew, “he was upset. He said, ‘No, that should have never taken place, that should never have happened.’” Mr. Payne reportedly confirmed her suspicions that children and adults should not be housed in the same room together.

The mother said that instead of immediately taking steps to launch an investigation, Mr. Payne asked whether she would like to open a case. Once she indicated that yes, she would indeed like

this matter investigated, he reportedly cautioned her that “if you open a case, police gon’ get involved.”

“When I think about it afterward, that should not have even happened,” the distraught woman said. “He should have just opened the file and then where the chips fall, they fall.” The woman said that upon mention of involving the police, “I got scared...I am not accusing anybody of anything, I just want to know really what happened.” Mr. Payne reportedly then suggested that Principal Edwards be allowed to continue investigating the matter, to which the mother agreed.

“Lord have mercy, to this day I feel so bad,” the woman told the Consortium, as she recollected events. “As a parent, you want to protect your child at all costs, and I feel like I didn't do that,” she lamented, choking back tears.

A second meeting with Mr. Edwards a few days later left the parents feeling discouraged. The then-principal’s concerned tone had reportedly disappeared, and according to the boy's mother, he was more interested in downplaying and justifying Mr. Smith's alleged behavior. By then, the boy's father had managed to extract a little more information from his son, including details about comments the parents deemed highly inappropriate.

Mr. Smith reportedly told the boy that “his legs were sexy like a horse,” but Mr. Edwards reportedly tried to explain it away by noting that the former track coach also groomed horses. Mr. Smith's alleged comments that he wanted to spend one night with the minor child was reportedly characterized by Mr. Edwards as him wanting to “straighten him out.”

“It was just a crazy meeting, when I think about it,” the woman said. Mr. Edwards also reportedly counseled “going easy” on Mr. Smith since his father was ill. “I was just disgusted after that meeting,” said the boy's mother. Even at that early stage, the woman said that she felt the investigation had already been compromised. Her antipathy was so strong that she declined to attend a third meeting later that week, which went ahead with Mr. Edwards, the boy, and the boy's father. At the end of the third meeting, the CAHS principal reportedly promised to return to the father with the results of his internal investigation.

“However, he didn't get back to him,” the woman said, recounting that she met Mr. Edwards at Home Depot months later. When she inquired about the status of the probe, Mr. Edwards reportedly told her that the matter was settled, and Mr. Smith was found not to have behaved inappropriately. “I didn't say anything; I walked off. I was just trying to get that child to finish school,” she said. Although there were at least three other adults on that trip in 2019, a report submitted subsequently had made no mention of any incidents. It just contained information about the team members’ performances at the track meet, the mother said Mr. Edwards had told her.

Meanwhile at home, things had changed. “The relationship between us became so strained,” the mother said. Her heretofore pleasant, obedient son had begun acting out and being disrespectful. “Our relationship was on a five, it went to a one,” the distraught mother recollected. “It's like, you just try to live your life now with an injured person, because he was now injured,” she said. “It was just tough, it was just tough for me.”

The woman said she tried to soldier on, until almost a year later, in November 2020, she received a call from a man who served as a youth mentor in the community. The man reportedly told her that “hey, something happened in that room.” Another student had reportedly reached out to him, distraught and crying, and said that they initially had not believed the woman's son, but now he did — something did happen in Puerto Rico that forced the woman's son to escape from the room he was sharing with Mr. Smith and seek refuge in another room.

The mentor had reportedly received more details of what had transpired than the boy's mother did, and so he said that he was going to alert CAHS officials. Sometime in February 2021, the man did as promised, reaching out to then-Assistant Principal Nneka Howard-Sibilly. "They had communications back and forth as to exactly what happened," the boy's mother said. Ultimately, one of the students was asked to come in to discuss the issue. "I think when they went in, they were gaslighted by Petrus," the mother said, referring to April Petrus, who had by then taken over as principal. "They were ignored, like 'Oh, I don't know what you're talking about.'" Ultimately, no action was taken.

The mother said that she herself remained ignorant of the horrific details of what had happened to her child until sometime in 2022 [after the matter became public](#), that she began piecing things together. Even then, her son was reluctant to confirm. "As time went on, I could see why he didn't want to be in that room, because the same disgusting Bruce used to take children off the school campus." The woman discovered that her son was one of those removed from the school compound. "He told me he took him off the campus twice." Mr. Smith reportedly took the boy to lunch and used the opportunity to engage in inappropriate discussions of an explicit sexual nature. That explained, the mother said, was why the boy was uneasy about the sleeping arrangements for the Puerto Rico trip from the beginning.

However, "I never in my wildest dreams believed somebody could have been so bold," she said regretfully. Now, she accepts the likelihood that the arrangements had been deliberately made. "Seven students in a room and one with a coach – that was orchestrated, right?" she asked rhetorically. She disclosed that Mr. Smith was the one who made the sleeping arrangements. Her request in 2019 to then-11th grade principal Ms. Sibilly for the school's rooming policy was ignored, the mother said.

"This whole entire issue is a failure on so many levels," the woman said. "It's not these three people," she emphasized. "People prior to them failed to act, they failed to do their job," the mother declared, alluding to a previous incident in which Mr. Smith was found behaving inappropriately and had his right to use the school van rescinded. "Why didn't something happen to this person [then]?" the irate parent asked. "How can you go to sleep every night knowing somebody's in your school perpetrating against people's children?"

Demonstrating the extent of the institutional inaction, the woman said that she went as far as attending a meeting of the Board Education seeking answers and assistance. "I was going anywhere I could, because I was shouldering by myself," she explained. "I [didn't] want to pick up a newspaper and read this again." A member of the Board reportedly informed her that it was the responsibility of the Department of Education to deal with Mr. Smith. "My good God almighty," the woman exclaimed.

She noted that at Smith's sentencing, no education officials were present. "If you had shown up for that, you would have [gotten] a gist of the nonsense, the horribleness this guy was doing," she asserted. "His family was present – six, seven of them to support him. Where was the community to support these youths?" the mother asked.

"I am disappointed with our governor," the woman continued, "because he promised he would have made sure he got to the bottom of the story. And he didn't do justice for us, for the children."

Asked whether she believed that the current investigation, though belated, would hold those who failed to act in their capacity as mandated reporters accountable, the woman expressed faint hope. Ultimately, however, "my trust has been eroded. I don't have trust anymore, it's been eroded

badly.”

Today, she says, her son — now an adult — is doing okay. Parent and child are trying to repair their relationship, but the woman admitted that things were still difficult. Outside of the damage done to her immediate family, however, she keeps wondering how many other children were able to be harmed by Mr. Smith because officials failed in their duty to safeguard the young Virgin Islanders in their care. She still wants answers.

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