DELAYED JUSTICE

# THIS SMALL TOWN PROTECTED A PREDATOR. NOW HIS SURVIVORS ARE FIGHTING BACK

A New Jersey school teacher was convicted of sexually assaulting a student in the 1980s but the town rallied around him. Now, more men are coming forward, asking for justice

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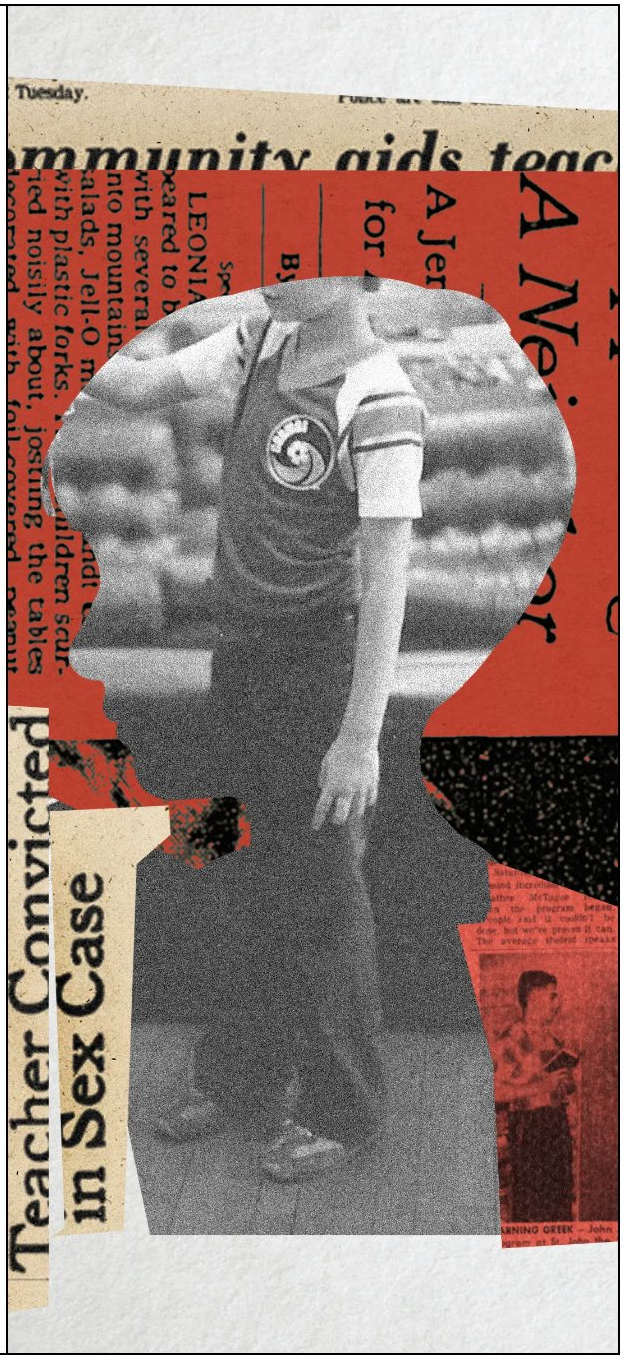


**I**t seemed like any city council meeting: a beige, cinderblock room, metal chairs, a U-shaped table with a maroon tablecloth reading "Leonia Board of Education." But for the men — some sporting matching T-shirts, claiming that they were survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of a once-beloved teacher — it signified a release, a silence broken.

Paul King, 59, choked back sobs as he took the mic, his family thronged behind him on a school lunch table bench. "I hope that none of you have ever experienced sexual assault," he said in measured tones, despite the emotion. "So what do I want? That's a good question. I don't know. But I do know that I want what's fair. I want the people that are victims to be free to come out. To heal. … There's a saying that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. This crisis has been going on for over 50 years."

“That was like the most I’ve ever seen him cry in my life,” King’s 24-year-old son, also named Paul, later tells me. He sat behind his father during his speech, nodding emphatically. “He was reaching really deep down into his memories, into his darkest, repressed stuff, to figure out what happened to him and convey it in a way that was more digestible for these guys sitting on the council.”

Nearly half a century ago, King and his fellow survivors saw their idyllic enclave of Leonia, **New Jersey**, turn into a hostile place. A leafy, close-knit community less than 10 miles from New York City, Leonia isn’t that kind place where tragedy often happens — in fact, it was the model for the suburban utopia depicted in Disney’s ***WandaVision***. But, much like in that show, there was unease beneath the surface: back in the Eighties, King and the rest watched as their beloved hometown rallied around elementary school teacher John Anagnosti, a.k.a. Mr. A — despite the fact that Mr. A was convicted of abusing one of their fellow students. It was a stunning state of affairs: a young boy’s pain dismissed, his abuser given a slap on the wrist and thousands of dollars of legal support from local parents. Now, though, due to expanding statutes of limitations on child sexual abuse cases, more and more of those who say they are Mr. A’s victims are coming forward, including two brothers who sued the school board, settling for a combined $6 million. As one of the plaintiff’s attorneys claims, more than a dozen survivors could be coming forward in the coming weeks — alleged victims of abuse that reportedly spanned nearly 15 years. And his supporters? Some have apologized to survivors; others are now silent.

AT 66, MICHAEL GONZALES RESEMBLES a svelte Santa Claus, wiry and strong. But back in the 1970s, he was an eight-year-old with a high and tight haircut and a mischievous smile — a Dennis the Menace incarnate. He also believes he was likely Mr. A’s first victim.

Joe and Mike Gonzales both say they were victims of Mr. A.

COURTESY OF THE GONZALEZ FAMILY

At the time, unconventional teaching was all the rage: field trips, dinners at teachers’ houses, ballgames — anything to get fidgety, bored students engaged. Mr. A embraced that educational style, even earning him a glowing piece in the local paper in 1971 about a class trip to dig fossils with a Columbia University professor. ”I spend so many hours with the kids outside the classroom because that’s when I truly get to see them as human beings,” he later told *The* ***New York Times***. ”They’re more open then. I feel that if I get to know them, I can help them.”

Unfortunately, it seems, those outings also allowed Mr. A unfettered access to his alleged victims, like Gonzales. “The bell rings for lunch, and he would put his arm out to prevent me from going out the classroom door, and that’s when the molestation started,” Gonzales says. He says Mr. A molested him until seventh grade, roughly 500 times, a claim also included in his lawsuit against the school board. “All the kids are out in the school yard playing, and I’m here being molested. That same scenario over and over again, but not just in the classroom…. That all started with me; that was his plan on how he gathered the kids. That was his master plan.”

Gonzales’ brother, Joe, also says he became one of Mr. A’s victims at age six, when Michael went by the teacher’s house to rake leaves with his brother in tow. Michael didn’t find out until years later, but the experience nearly ruined both of the brothers’ lives. “I became a bully. I

ruined friendships," Michael says. "I came out of high school and I didn't know how to read, because I couldn't concentrate." Joe, 60, turned to drinking at age 12; he was 35 days sober when we spoke. "I wasn't born an alcoholic," he says. "I was born a normal kid that was abused at five, six years old, and alcohol, it was a savior, and it is the love of my life."

The brothers' pain only intensified in January of 1981, when an elementary school student publicly accused Mr. A of molestation. "I carried around that burden," Michael says, his voice breaking. "Why didn't I say something? It's not what he did to me. These kids [that he may have abused], who knows if they're even alive…. It's just a total failure of humanity." It didn't help that the people of Leonia seemed firmly on Mr. A's side back in 1981. When the child's father paraded through the town center with a sign proclaiming the teacher's guilt — then took the pulpit at the Presbyterian Church to do the same — **he was charged** with harassment, and endangering his child by keeping him out of school, and ordered to undergo a psychiatric evaluation, according to *The New York Times*.

Mr. A wasn't completely able to escape consequences. In spring **of that year**, following an investigation he was charged with molesting the student, pleaded guilty, and resigned. Still, by June, he'd changed his tune — especially after local parents had raised $7,500 for his defense. Mr. A then opted to retract his plea, claiming that he'd only fessed up to the **crime** to spare the child "emotional trauma." The case then moved to state Superior Court, and in 1982, he was convicted of sexual assault.

It may seem strange in 2025 that Leonia would stand by an alleged child abuser, but even the headlines of the day reflect a different time: **"Leonia Parents Support Teacher in Morals Case,"** trumpets one, while another article, titled **"Supporting a Neighbor,"** casts a benefit dinner at All Saints Episcopal Church as a heartwarming communion in support of a beloved educator. "When Mr. A resigned," one child said, according to the paper, "we got a teacher who just told us what to do and sat there. Mr. A said it was better to learn by experiencing things. We went to New York to the planetarium, to the World Trade Center, to the Statue of Liberty and other places. The class would go to his house for dinner and talk about what we'd seen."

According to the the *Times,* the local TV shop even put up an open letter from Mr. A thanking the town for its support — a sore point for Joe, who worked at the store. Paul King had to walk by that poster every day on his walk to school, silently seething. "Joe told me, 'Every time I walked into that TV [store], I look at that effing poster," he says. "I'm thinking, 'I've been abused for over two years by this guy, like big time.'…It wasn't, 'You show me your weenie and I'll show you mine,' it was full-on physical touching and beyond.' But nobody believed the kid." King has not filed a suit.

LEARNING GREEK — John Anagnosti, director of language program at St. John the Baptist School, Fairview, listens

Mr. A in the classroom.

Michael was similarly enraged by the support. He was on leave from the Army when he heard the news of Mr. A's conviction, and wracked with guilt and shame (and alcohol), he went to the man's house with the intention of killing him. Mr. A let him into his condo, and after calling his lawyer or psychiatrist — Michael isn't sure which — Michael changed his mind. "You know, it tortures me," he says. "I could have went to jail. I could have ruined my whole life."

Even after Mr. A was convicted of sexual assault, the judgment was muted. He received only three years of probation and a $25 fine. "I don't know what other punishment this man deserves," the judge opined at the time, while Mr. A took the stand to tell the court: "I would rather cut off my right hand than harm a hair on a child. My love for children is genuine." It's not all that surprising, then, that Leonia received a glowing write-up in the infamous pedophile magazine, *Pan,* an underground publication about **"boy love."** "He was indicted by a grand jury in October. But instead of running him out of town, as, sadly, often happens in such cases, the community rallied to his support," the magazine said. "It must have occurred to more than one of the good parents at the All Saints Episcopal Church: John Anagnosti is a paedophile in the true sense of the word; he loves children, and whether or not there is a sexual expression of this love would not seem to be very important."

MR. A DIED IN 2020, BUT THE MEN never forgot him — or what he did. And, at the time, they suffered in silence, since neither King nor the Gonzaleses knew that they shared the same abuser. "I had lost my hope," Michael says. "I'm going to the grave with the secret. …I'm laying in bed, and I see this commercial on TV, and it says if you were molested by a teacher in New Jersey or something or another, to call this number. I called the number."

The law firm from the commercial then connected Michael with Baldante & Rubenstein, which has seen a massive uptick in such cases since New Jersey, along with several other states, changed its statute of limitations for child sexual abuse survivors in 2019. Now, Michael and his brother could fight back. "When you sit down with these victims and they start to tell their story, oftentimes we're the first person they've ever spoken to about it," lawyer John Baldante says. He adds that 80 to 90 percent of their cases deal with sexual abuse cases. "They start crying like the eight- and 10-year old-children that they were when they were abused. … One of my clients once said, 'It's the first time I've ever spoken out on behalf of that 10-year-old version of myself.'"

With Baldante's help, Joe and Michael each sued the Leonia Township Board of Education, alleging that the school and board knew about Mr. A's reported actions, but did nothing to stop them. "Despite such knowledge," Michael's suit reads, "[the school] failed to adequately respond to stop harassment…against the plaintiff."

The brothers garnered a combined $6 million in separate settlements in 2024. Still, according to Michael's daughter, Keegan, "this lawsuit wasn't a payday. It was acknowledgement that something horrific happened, and the school system failed these kids. The story does not end here. We're going to continue speaking about this, because this goes beyond compensation. We

want people's stories to be heard." To date, Baldante says several other men have come forward with similar stories about Mr. A, and he expects there will be many more. The firm is in the process of working up further litigation. "There's no question that there's undoubtedly hundreds [of victims]," he claims. "Mr. A was the Pied Piper." Although stressing that there are only three cases of litigation currently pending against the teacher and school board, Baldante says "in the context of cases against a single perpetrator within a public school Board of Education, the claims against Mr. A are evolving into one of the largest clusters of claims."

Daniel Schlademan created a website so Mr. A's victims could come forward.

AND THAT BRINGS US BACK TO THAT city council meeting. Through a series of happenstances, Keegan met the younger Paul King, and they figured out that both their fathers claim to have been victims of Mr. A — right before the Gonzaleses and another alleged survivor, Daniel Schlademan, were due to speak at the meeting on June 17. In light of more and more alleged victims coming forward, the men planned to address the Board of Education, calling on them to take steps to bring closure and comfort to the victims, as well as concrete moves to ensure the safety of the town's children in the future.

King joined them, and, one by one, they emptied their hearts in that ugly municipal board room. The men acknowledged that the school board is populated by far different people than it was 50 years ago, but they still want justice — and recognition of systemic failure. "The Leonia school district dismissed the reports of sexual abuse made by students and tried to sweep Anagnosti's predatory conduct under the carpet," says the lawyer, Baldante. "Unfortunately, these efforts by Leonia only compounded the problem."

"The Leonia School District is currently involved in active litigation related to these matters, and therefore we cannot provide specific comments," said Daniel Lee, President of Leonia Board of Education. "That said, our lack of direct response to the public comments on this matter must not be mistaken for indifference to the pleas of those who have come forward. We recognize how painful these issues may be for victims, their families, and the wider community. We take this concern very seriously. The Board's goal is always to foster a safe, supportive environment, and we are mindful of the role we can play in the healing process. At this moment, however, our legal and ethical responsibilities require restraint to avoid jeopardizing the district or those it serves now and in the future."

In a 2022 filing, the BOE denied "any wrongdoing or negligence," adding: "The Board did not have actual or constructive knowledge of the allegations of sexual misconduct of Defendant John Anagnosti. The Board did not enable any alleged sexual abuse and the Board did not fail to take action with regards to any alleged sexual abuse."