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TOP STORY

WKU lecture features reporters who exposed Larry Nassar

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Mark Alesia

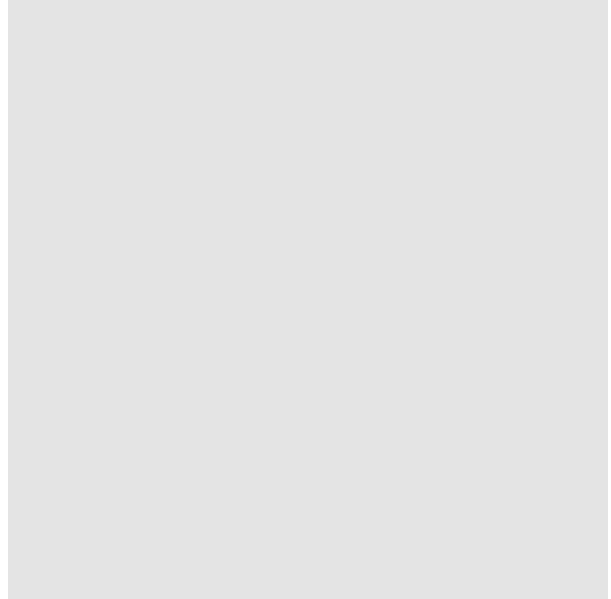
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Marisa Kwiatkowski, left, and Tim Evans of the Indianapolis Star speak about their work exposing Larry Nassar's sexual abuse on Monday, April 9, 2018, at Jody Richards Hall. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

Two reporters whose work helped convict serial child molester Larry Nassar shared their story Monday at Western Kentucky University during this year's John B. Gaines Family Lecture.

Indianapolis Star reporters Marisa Kwiatkowski and Tim Evans spoke during a panel moderated by WKU journalism professor Amanda J. Crawford in Jody Richards Hall. Mark Alesia, the third reporter on the newspaper's investigative team, was unable to attend.

The journalists spoke as part of an annual lecture series sponsored by the Gaines family, which owns the Daily News. The series launched in 2004 to celebrate the newspaper's 150th anniversary.

The series has hosted award-winning journalists including New York Times reporter and WKU graduate Nikita Stewart, Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Leonard Pitts and official White House photographer Pete Souza, among many others.

Although the Indianapolis Star reporters are perhaps best known for breaking the Nassar story, their investigation started as a broader investigation of the culture of child sexual abuse in USA Gymnastics, which governs the U.S. Olympic team. Kwiatkowski said the story originated out of reporting on schools' failure to report sexual abuse.

Their investigation turned up a policy of failing to report all sexual abuse accusations against USA Gymnastics coaches. That practice enabled coaches to continue preying on children even after multiple complaints, according to the Indianapolis Star.

Through court records, Evans said the team uncovered a policy that USA Gymnastics officials would only report accusations to the authorities if it was signed by either a victim or a victim's parent. Reports from local gym owners were not enough for the organization.

Kwiatkowski said the reporters regularly encountered victims who said they were discouraged from reporting abuse.

“Even when they did report, they were told that what happened to the them was not abuse,” she said.

Kwiatkowski added that the reporters used meticulous fact-checking, background research on coaches and public records to hone in on the organization’s culture of abuse.

The team had no reason to suspect Nassar until the first report in the series was published in August 2016.

Evans said the team’s first tip about the disgraced USA Gymnastic national team doctor came from a Louisville woman.

“We had no idea that Larry Nassar was a bad guy at that time,” he said.

Although he’s now described as one of the most prolific child abusers in history, Kwiatkowski said he was previously known as a pillar of the gymnastics community.

“He was running for school board at the time,” she said.

However, after the reporters were able to track down multiple victims and compare their stories, the reports seemed increasingly credible.

“They told us the exact same details,” he said, adding the team also researched Nassar’s accusers to verify their motives.

As the reporters set to work on the Nassar story, Evans reached out to him in September 2016 for comment not expecting to get a response.

He was surprised to get two emails from Nassar, who said he wanted to clear up misunderstandings and that he was willing to be interviewed with his lawyer present.

Evans said that, at the time, Nassar’s attorney denied the doctor’s use of any intervaginal procedures.

Later, when Evans made the four-hour drive to meet with Nassar and his lawyer, he was shown what Nassar described as training videos demonstrating a procedure. Evans described them as “softcore porn.”

When Kwiatkowski texted Evans with news of a lawsuit against Nassar filed in California and Evans shared that news, Nassar’s attorney decided to cut the interview short. Although he initially seemed confident, Evans could later see Nassar’s eyes fluttering and other nervous ticks.



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“He was out in the public,” Evans said, adding that Nassar could no longer manipulate the narrative. “Everyday more people were coming forward.”

After the Nassar story broke, the reporters heard from supporters who fervently defended him.

For Kwiatkowski, however, that was easy to push past.

“Every single word of every single article we published was verified,” she said. “It made it easier for us to just push the noise aside.”

Evans added that the reporters published their source documents with the story so others could see for themselves.

When the reporters were asked how they got victims to trust them, Kwiatkowski said they took things slow and constantly communicated where they were in their reporting. She said they would return to sources and ask them if they were comfortable with certain details of their abuse being published.

“We kind of let them be in control,” she said.

Both stressed the importance of believing victims and taking their complaints seriously.

Ken Barlow, a WKU freshman and journalism major, said the reporters inspired him.

“I think it was inspiring just as a journalism major to see the amount of work put into this,” he said. “I aspire to be like that someday.”

Kwiatkowski told the Daily News that the public often misunderstands the work of journalists. In an era of fake news, she said they’re often confused with pundits.

“Local and regional journalism is vital,” she said. “It’s the day-to-day coverage that leads to the broader coverage.”

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.