Two legacies ... one man

Sign just outside stadium ignites debate between Bill Billings' past players and victims: legendary coach or sexually abusive teacher?

By MELISSA NANN BURKE

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At first, Mary Vawter asked nicely.

Then she demanded.

Finally, she sued to get the name of her alleged abuser removed from Middletown High School's stadium.

In March, the school board changed the name.

This fall, it returned.

At home games, a group of alumni hoist a 20-foot-long banner in tribute to the legacy of an iconic and barrier-breaking coach.

The 15-foot-high sign — erected just behind the south end zone — can be read from anywhere inside: "Welcome to Bill Billings Alumni Stadium."

Vawter was one of more than 25 victims and witnesses who reported sexual misconduct by Billings to administrators during a five-day inquiry in 1981. The handwritten statements, signed by students, alumni and at least one parent, describe specific incidents at the school from 1974 to 1981.

Billings was never charged with any crime as a result of the complaints. He resigned from Middletown High in July 1981 and later taught at other schools in Delaware. Eight years later, he resigned after more allegations of misconduct with female students emerged, according to state records. He was then teaching at St. Andrew's School near Middletown and Hodgson Vo-Tech in Glasgow.
Appoquinimink School District officials say the sign is not on school property and thus beyond their reach.

"It's just cowardly. It's not like they're defending a Joe Paterno–type who was maybe too complicit but never touched anybody," said school board member Joanne Christian, referring to the child sex scandal that erupted at Penn State University this month after a former assistant coach of Paterno's was charged with abusing young boys.

"This is the perpetrator of the deed."

Vawter says Billings sexually abused and harassed her when she was a 16– and 17–year–old student at Middletown more than 30 years ago.

In February, when the settlement was announced, district officials acknowledged that there were at least two victims.

But school–district records recently obtained by The News Journal and interviews with retired school administrators show Billings may have targeted dozens of teenage girls during his 19–year career at Middletown — far more than the school district has ever acknowledged.

Other alumni, as well as current and former district employees, said it's probable others had similar experiences.

"This was the tip of the iceberg," said former Middletown principal Andrew Pollock Jr., who helped compile the statements in 1981 and recommended Billings' dismissal to superiors. "I was sorry they never took this to police."

Vawter considers the banner an act of bullying and an attempt to trivialize her claims about Billings, who died in 2007 at age 82. The sign so incensed Vawter she has decided to tell her story for the first time.

"Putting his name up at the stadium in the first place was a slap in the face for every one of Billings' victims," said Vawter, 48, of Townsend.

Yet Billings has fierce defenders in a football town where field lights shine brightly on cool Friday nights in the fall. A former shipwelder, Billings literally helped build the stadium and, with it, Middletown's name in high–school sports.

Jimmy Reynolds, 62, a town councilman and vice mayor of Middletown who played for Billings, helped lead the 1997 campaign to name the stadium for him.

"The stadium was named after us. We're Bill Billings alumni," said Reynolds, who wouldn't discuss the allegations against his coach.

Black players from the 1960s credit Billings with easing tension during school desegregation.

"We're talking about what he did for the town and its young men," said Ernest "Rock" Saunders, 63, of New Castle, who played football for Billings and supports the banner, "not what he did behind closed doors."

Town leaders said they have received no official complaints about the banner, which was first erected on municipal property. The alumni have since moved it to private land.
School administrators have urged the men to give it up.

"We don't need to wallow in these country folklore days of heroes," Christian said.

"You have to acknowledge there's other things at play here. There's terms of the agreement, and you don't rub somebody's nose in what was their pain."

**Middletown 'on the map'**

Few knew of the farming community, population 2,190, when Billings arrived in 1962 — an outsider with a Carolina drawl and a volatile streak.

Recruiters called him the "best high school coach in North Carolina," where Billings' record at Edenton High was 77–15–3.

Middletown presented a challenge, having won just 14 of 74 games in its history. Soon enough, the 5–foot–6 coach gave folks a reason to stand tall.

He led the Cavaliers to a 52–game winning streak in the mid–1960s and numerous state and conference titles. Billings was named Delaware Interscholastic Coach of the Year three times and inducted into the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame in 1998.

"At the football games, you'd be on the edge of your seat, cheering for the team. People would cry when we'd win — the girls, you know," said Linda Melvin Robinson, 56, who graduated in 1973. "It was such a big deal, keeping that title."

Billings' influence extended beyond the gridiron. Residents said he helped curb delinquency and boosted players' morale, even if they never saw any playing time. "Bill Billings had a way of making us play together and get along," Saunders said.

Billings treated all players the same — black or white, scrubs or stars, said Clarence Saunders, Rock's brother. Billings was among the teachers who sought Clarence out when he tried to drop out of school.

"I'm grateful today," said Saunders, Delaware's leading scorer in 1964, now retired and living in Texas.

Despite Billings' success, he never went on to coach at the college level. At age 47 in 1971, he told the Philadelphia Inquirer he was content in Middletown.

"It's a small town with nice people, and if you tie one on here, it's your own business," Billings said. He was married and had children.

Still, people talked. His sterling coaching record belied personal faults, including a temper and other impulsive behavior.

Police had to intervene when Billings and a newspaper reporter nearly came to blows after a loss to Wilmington High in the state title game in 1971. At the 1972 All–Star Football Game, he barged across the field and swung at the opposing coach. In 1980, Billings was sentenced to 12 months' probation after he charged a sideline worker during a game at McKean High School, accusing him of radioing plays to the other team.
Investigation

In March 1981, a 10th-grader at Middletown approached guidance counselor Susan Scheers, vowing she'd never return to gym class. Billings had molested her in his office, she said.

Scheers, now Susan Kugel, took the allegation to Pollock, then a first-year principal. At the school board's instruction, he and Assistant Superintendent Olive B. Loss launched an investigation.

Girls had previously complained about Billings to Middletown teachers, but none would put their names to paper, said Larry Pratt, who preceded Pollock as principal.

"The kids didn't want to go to court and face that exposure," Pratt said.

Kugel promised the girls their names and statements would be kept confidential. But they had to write out statements, sign and date them as evidence, she said. She explained the scope of the inquiry and let the news circulate.

Within days, she received calls from alumnae in four states, in addition to statements submitted by students and graduates in the surrounding area, she said.

Many who came forward had Billings for gym or served as his student aide or clerical staff. In reviewing the details, Kugel and Pollock discerned a pattern in Billings' behavior.

He often asked questions about the girls' sexual experience, offered them liquor and pulled them onto his lap.

He French-kissed some, touched their breasts and told several he loved them. In exchange for hall passes, he hoped they'd sleep with him, one girl said. They used his car to run errands. He asked them to go to Atlantic City with him.

Henry Kwasnieski, the parent of a football player, wrote that he'd come upon Billings with his hand up a girl's skirt, according to their report.

During the inquiry, Kugel met with Vawter, then a senior working a part-time office job for Billings.

Billings molested Vawter on numerous occasions, according to her lawsuit. He also asked to look down her blouse, requested she read from dirty magazines and gave her a copy of "The Hite Report," a study of human sexuality.

Vawter told Kugel she was scared. She wouldn't talk to police. But she signed her name to a statement describing some of Billings' advances.

Five days into the investigation, Loss took the file. She told Pollock the board had instructed her to give it to its attorney, Daniel F. Wolcott Jr.

Pollock and Kugel never saw it again. (Loss died in 2005.) Both say they were instructed never to speak of the matter.

In May 1981, a news report of the investigation suggested it arose from a single student, whose complaint could not be "confirmed officially."
"The inquiry began after a female student complained to school officials that the coach had conducted himself inappropriately."

It was not reported that other girls made similar claims. Teachers told students Billings was on sick leave the rest of the year.

In June of that year, Wolcott announced the matter was resolved. In a statement, he said the board "contemplates no action against Mr. Billings."

"I have been absolved of any wrongdoing," Billings said in an Aug. 2, 1981, story in The News Journal. "A lot of the things that have been said about me in recent months are not true, but I'm not going to comment further at this time."

The board accepted Billings' resignation Aug. 12, despite a petition with 300 signatures urging members to reinstate him.

**What's in a name?**

Vawter, who had graduated the previous spring, was told nothing except that Billings had left the school.

Many in the community believed Billings' claim of innocence.

"We knew the allegations were out there when it happened," said Unitas S. Todd Sr., class of '75, who played under Billings. "When you didn't hear anything, we figured it was over."

Clarence Saunders is still not convinced anything inappropriate happened.

"I'm not saying it's made up. I'm just saying I don't believe it," he said. "I wasn't there."

Yet, when a group of alumni campaigned to name the stadium for Billings in 1997, a tipster prompted school board member Dave R. Thomas Sr. to check around, Thomas said.

He learned that Billings had faced similar allegations of misconduct at another school in 1989 after he left Middletown. Thomas cast the sole vote against naming it Bill Billings Alumni Stadium.

Years later, Pollock, who lives north of Philadelphia, pulled off Del. 1 at Middletown on his way to visit family. He'd heard the district put Billings' name on the stadium but doubted the story.

"There it was. I howled," Pollock said. "After all that had happened. After all the information the school district had about him, they did that."

Mary Vawter also was disgusted. But it wasn't until years later, after many hours of counseling, that she mustered the courage to talk about her trauma.

In 2003, Vawter testified about her abuse before a state Senate committee when lawmakers were considering eliminating the statute of limitations on prosecuting sexual offenses in Delaware.

"Can you imagine what I felt, attending my daughter's graduation and having to walk under a sign honoring him?" Vawter said to the senators.
The bill passed. Vawter returned to Dover for hearings when lawmakers were considering the 2007 Child Victim's Act. That legislation suspended the statute of limitation on civil suits for child sexual abuse, opening a two−year window during which cases could be filed.

The law ultimately resulted in 170 civil suits, the majority naming Catholic priests. At least one — Vawter's — named the Appoquinimink School District.

**At last, validation**

District officials settled with Vawter for $100,000, but note Vawter wasn't trying to get rich.

"Oh, they could have shaken us down for more money," said school board member Christian. "It wasn't about the money for Mary."

Vawter had met with district administrators about the stadium in 2004 and 2008. She told them of Billings' conduct toward her and about the statement to Kugel in 1981. She brought along Billings' copy of "The Hite Report." She asked repeatedly for the removal of his name from a place of honor.

Administrators searched their records but couldn't corroborate her claims, they said. They even contacted Henry Harper, the district superintendent during Billings' departure in 1981. (Harper did not return calls to comment on this story.)

"It was a he−said, she−said, rumor−mill−type thing," said Tony Marchio, who recently retired as superintendent of Appoquinimink. "You could talk to 10 different people and get 10 different versions of what happened then. It was hard to substantiate."

That changed early this year, when the investigation file from 1981 surfaced, having been tucked away at the offices of Wolcott, the school district's former attorney, Christian said.

"Not to be opened without the written permission of the school board," the envelope reads.

"It had something to do with the agreement of Bill leaving, that it would be a sealed document if he'd resign," Christian said.

In the file, among the accusers' statements, was a letter from Billings denying an incident Jan. 10, 1981, in which he accidentally touched a female student's chest, he said.

"I am not now, nor ever have I practiced any deliberate touching of any girl," Billings wrote.

Helen Kimmey said no lawyer ever presented the board with the results of the 1981 investigation.

"I didn't miss any meetings," said Kimmey, 81, one of two surviving board members from that time. The other, Elizabeth Rodgers, did not respond to calls.

Kimmey also said she never received Pollock's letter summarizing 16 of the complaints against Billings, although the records say she and other board members were carbon−copied.

"That guidance counselor wasn't qualified to do the investigation. Someone from the police should've," Kimmey said.

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Billings went to Kimmey and tearfully denied the accusations, she said.

"It's just a lot of gossip," she said. "I just couldn't picture him doing it."

Closure, sort of

With the long-lost file in hand, the district "tried to do right" by Vawter, Marchio said.

He and Christian met with Vawter and officially apologized on behalf of the district. The board gave the Middletown arena a new name, Cavalier Stadium.

Vawter reunited with Kugel and another Billings victim who participated in the 1981 inquiry. The trio shared tears and lunch at a Rehoboth Beach restaurant, then retreated to Kugel's home, talking for hours.

The mother of three grown children, Vawter's life has changed little since then. She works 60 hours a week as a church custodian and bus driver. She drives the same worn-out Ford, a 1996 Aerostar van pushing 200,000 miles.

"Middletown was my home, and I'm glad I graduated from there," she said. "I'm just not proud the town's reverting to the Dark Ages."

On Saturday, the No. 2-seeded Cavaliers play in the semifinals of the Division I state football tournament. It will be their last home game of the season.

It's likely the alumni will attend with their Billings banner, but Vawter hasn't gone to a game in years.

And she won't, she says, until Billings is truly gone.

Contact Melissa Nann Burke at 324-2329 or mburke@delawareonline.com.