



## Nassar's case hits close to home for Flagler senior

**WRITTEN BY HASANI MALONE**

On Jan. 24, Larry Nassar, the national team doctor of USA Gymnastics, was convicted and sentenced to 175 years in prison. Nassar was accused by over 165 women and girls of sexual abuse over the past two decades and pled guilty to more than seven counts of criminal sexual conduct.

But for many girls, like Flagler senior Courtney Boyle, it was more than just a conviction – but liberation from painful secrets looming over the gymnastics world. And Boyle can recognize this pain just as much as the others.

Starting from age six, Boyle began her gymnastics career after spending an extensive amount of time on the monkey bars during recess. She participated on the club level because of the competitiveness that surrounded it – something she couldn't find in high school-level gymnastics, she said.

But her time in the sport isn't what gives her a unique outlook on the trial. What sets her apart is her own experiences with Ray Adams, a USAG coach who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for child pornography and sexual assault in 2013.

Adams, who was Boyle's coach in 2007, pushed her to send him pictures of her abdomen and would attempt to buy her extravagant gifts such as a motor scooter and cellphone, she said. Six years later at age 15, she would find out about his sentencing during practice – breaking down in front of her coach and confiding in him about her situation.

"I'll never forget him being so understanding about it when I couldn't even comprehend what [was] happening," Boyle said. "You put all of your trust into the people around you in gymnastics. So to have that trust be broken and betrayed is just absolutely heartbreaking. [I also felt] anger. So much anger, because why the \*\*\*\* are they not doing anything about it? You can't tell me that your reputation as an organization is more important than these hundreds of girls' safety. It's just baffling."

Now at 21, during the time of an explosive #MeToo movement and fight for a change in how the public addresses sexual harassment in the workplace, the ex-gymnast experienced a new wave of emotions after hearing that Nassar would be convicted for his role in the exploitation of the young athletes. After leaving a class meeting, she received a text from her mom, in all caps, relaying the verdict.

"We walked out of the building, and I was so excited I started screaming," Boyle said. "That's a really terrible thing to be excited about, but I was just so happy. He got what he deserves."

For Boyle, she admits that although she loves the sport, she would never allow her future children into the club level. To her, change will not come until they reform the organization on a top down level by providing more thorough background checks for their coaches and taking accusations of the girls and women involved more seriously.

According to CNN, a number of women had brought the Nassar abuse to the organization's attention, but was met with silencing and an attempt to turn a blind eye – leading to a massive pile up that would result in over 100 accusations in the course of two decades.

One of the first accusations came from Larissa Boyce who, at 16, was abused by Nassar. Boyce confided in Katie Klages, who was the head coach at Michigan State University at the time, where Nassar was employed for two decades. Boyce was discouraged from filing a formal complaint, according to a federal lawsuit. Boyce's story wasn't very different from many other girls after her.

"This could have stopped in 1997," Boyce said. "But instead of notifying authorities or even my parents, we were interrogated. We were led to believe we were misunderstanding a medical technique."

Elite gymnast Maggie Nichols, who was the first to report the abuse of Nassar, released a statement blasting the organization for taking so long to make steps towards keeping the safety of their gymnast as a top priority, rather than their reputation.

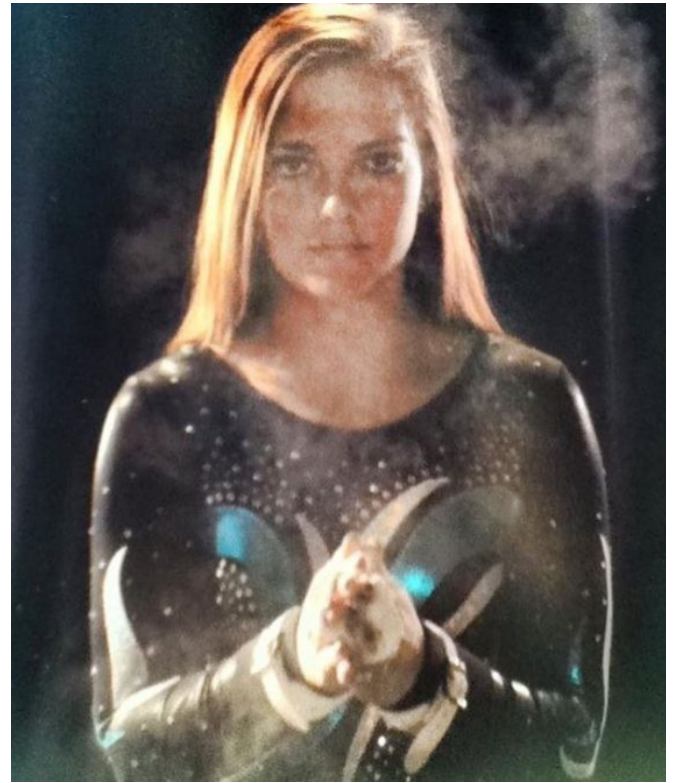
While USAG did hire a private investigator after the allegations, it took three weeks to interview Nichols, and after, USAG didn't call the FBI for five weeks after it was reported.

In the first statement regarding Nassar, the organization wrote in solidarity with Nichols, claiming to focus everyday on cultivating a "culture of empowerment" which is meant to encourage athletes "to speak up about abuse and other difficult topics." and claimed to have reported Nassar both in 2015 and 2016 to the FBI, but were told not to discuss the situation.

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*Flagler senior Courtney Boyle is able to relate to those who testified in the case against Larry Nassar. Photo courtesy: Courtney Boyle*

Boyle doesn't believe this was the case, because of the organization's history with sexual assault allegations. But despite all that has occurred, she only hopes for the best for the organization and finds strength in the gymnast that have come out.

"I wouldn't be the person I am today without gymnastics. I think it's an amazing sport that teaches you an abundance of life lessons that are so valuable as a person," Boyle said. "I learned how to be strong as a person emotionally [and] physically. I learned how to put my complete and total trust in someone whether I want to or not. You learn how to be committed [and] strong."