

NEWS

## Digital predators, teen victims, Part 1: One girl shares her ordeal to warn others



Most child and teenage sexual assault victims know the attacker before the assault. Against the national landscape, one 15-year-old shares her story, her struggles and how to survive. (Illustration by Jeff Geortzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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*Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series.*

"We were just 13 and 15 years old."

With those words, a teenager we will call Jane Doe starts to write her Victim Impact Statement about how a young man she met on the Internet stole "the most precious years of a girl's life."

With the support of her parents, she practices reading her statement again and again, struggling to stop from weeping as she recounts the assaults three years ago when she was 15 and one of the other victims was just 13.

More than almost anything, the teenager wants the man who pleaded guilty to two misdemeanors and four felonies involving four different victims in four different places to hear her voice in a courtroom ring loud and strong and clear.

But after 33 god-awful months, her fear, anger, confusion and pain prove too much. It is mid-September – less than a month ago – and Jane, now a high school senior, breaks down in the halls of justice, unable to speak.



No teenager should have to sit in a courtroom struggling to read her own words because she is sobbing, because when she was a high school freshman she connected online – according to her Victim Impact Statement – with a "sick, narcissistic predator that searches for girls on social media and then preys on girls that are much younger."

Yet that is what happened three years ago, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, she writes in her statement.

More alarming is that despite widespread warnings about Internet predators, there are scores of Jane Does.

Similar crimes continue to occur across America as new waves of unsuspecting and naive teens meet online predators who masquerade as kindly men or the proverbial boy next door.

Consider that Jane's assailant, who was 18 when they met, was a soccer player on his high school and college teams.

He also was an Eagle Scout.

## **Smartphone danger**

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Few are immune and if you think your child is safe, think again. The Orange County District Attorney's office estimates that, on average, they see a new case involving a digital predator once a week.

Jane Doe is smart, aware and tech savvy. She is loved and cared for by her parents and lives in a multimillion-dollar home on Orange County's gold coast.

Still – like nearly all young teens – she wasn't world-wise or street-smart.

According to Jane Doe, she met her assailant on Instagram. She says she thought he was younger than she was. For a few weeks, they communicated briefly on and off. He reportedly wanted to switch to Snapchat, but she didn't have a Snapchat account. Then she mentioned she was home alone from school, sick.

Jane Doe says, "He became very persistent," and said they could watch a movie. She gave up her address.

When the man she met online arrived at the family home, Jane was barely 15.

Her bedroom was decorated with white wallpaper, small pink roses and pink ribbons. The bedding had pink polka dots. She treasured her stuffed panda and fuzzy bunny.

For Jane, however, her smartphone opened a dangerous crack.

During one of several interviews, Jane's father – names are withheld because the victim is a minor as well as a sexual assault victim – reaches across a table and holds out his cellphone.

"This," he warns, barely able to contain the anger and pain of the last several years, "is a key to your child's room."

Understand, John Doe is a tech whiz who regularly monitored his children's smartphones.

Even so, the hunted are no match for the hunters.

According to a survey of juvenile victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes, "the majority met the predator willingly face-to-face."

Additionally, "93 percent of those encounters included sexual contact."

In Jane Doe's case, the defendant – now a convict – is a young man named Christian Callahan. He turned 21 last month and this weekend started a 180-day jail sentence.

To report the defendant's point of view, I visited the Callahan family home. No one answered the door and a note resulted in a phone call from Callahan's attorney, Jeremy Goldman, stating that his client declines to talk.

Yet until his arrest, the convict's bona fides appeared impeccable.

A decade ago, Orange County Register surf writer Corky Carroll shared in his column that his son reported he had a good group of friends. "Christian Callahan is funny," Carroll's son wrote, "and really good at soccer."

Several years later, in 2012, Callahan for his Eagle Scout project created a free soccer clinic to inspire kids to donate sports equipment that would be shipped to Africa. That July, KABC news covered Callahan's efforts and reported the boy "is living up to the finest tradition of scouting."

A few years ago, The Orange County Register went so far as to give Callahan a soccer shout out, calling him "a player to watch." In a recent photo, Callahan smiles in his Irvine Valley College soccer uniform.

His parents' home in south Orange County has a view and includes four bedrooms and three bathrooms.

But it wasn't shared goals or living in homes of comfort that drew Jane Doe and Callahan together. It was a confluence of events in which online connections away from the eyes of parents played a key role.

## **Misplaced guilt, shame**

It is one week after Callahan entered the Doe home and Jane has told no one in the family about Callahan's visit or what happened.

Jane is ashamed, frightened and filled with self-blame over what occurred in her bedroom as well as allowing a stranger into the house.

Guilt and fear are all too common. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, only 30 percent of sexual assault cases are reported to authorities and only 16 percent of rape cases are reported.

After plea bargaining, Callahan admits to felony charges involving Jane Doe that include “luring of a child,” “distribute pornography to minor with intent to engage in sexual conduct,” and “unlawful sexual intercourse with minor who is three years younger than the perpetrator.”

“Unlawful sexual intercourse” is what many generally refer to as “statutory rape.”

Five-foot-2 and 115 pounds, Jane Doe reports she froze and stared at a digital clock during the assault. Experts call such a move “disassociation,” and explain it’s a defense mechanism in the brain that helps us survive trauma.

As Callahan starts to leave the Doe home, according to a court statement, he asks, “Aren’t you going to walk me to the door? Don’t you have manners?”

After a week, Jane Doe can’t hold back her pain and shame any longer. In a torrent of tears, she blurts to a school guidance counselor what happened.

The counselor immediately calls Jane’s mother and asks her to come to school. Mom is a woman of intelligence and substance and is used to handling international challenges with ease. Still, the call unnerves.

“Is this bullying?” Mom asks.

“No,” the counselor says. “All I can tell you is that it’s not her fault.”

Attempting to comprehend what’s going on, Mom explains she has an important appointment with a group of people. “What’s the reason?” she demands. “You need to tell me right now.”

“Your daughter’s been raped.”

## Grim game of numbers

The word, “rape,” sucks the air out of the car. Jane Doe’s mother feels like she’s been slugged in the stomach. She can’t breathe.

There is nothing in her body that prepares her for the word “rape.” Her brain can’t connect the awful word with her little girl.

Finally, Mom manages to gather herself. She drives toward the school and calls her husband. The conversation is surreal. Their world has exploded.

Dad pushes away all emotion and shifts into emergency mode. But, in truth, he knows it’s too late to save his daughter from the horror that’s already happened.

As their daughter opens up a little, Mom, Dad and daughter hug and share tears. But they can only focus on the immediate.

Later, Mom and Dad learn the crime occurred inside the family home, an affront that seems to compound the cruelty. Yet the location is not unusual.

The justice department reports that 69 percent of sexual assaults involving teens happen in the victim’s home, the offender’s home or a friend’s home.

As I come to know the family, Jane Doe’s mother plops a stack of paper on the living room table. She says it contains more than 300 photographs of girls from Callahan’s Instagram account.

My review of Callahan’s Instagram account shows he has 127 followers and follows 313 accounts.

On something called Ask.fm, another global social networking site, I find an account with Callahan’s name and photo that has 9,276



Christian Callahan

The day after Callahan assaults Jane Doe, his Ask.fm account resumes activity.

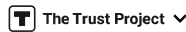
In response to one query, Callahan’s Ask.fm account answers, “Oh okay haha. Yeah im not posting a picture of my abs sorry (smiley face).” Then, the Callahan account user suggests switching to an app in which texts can’t be traced. “Just snapchat me v maybe you’ll be lucky and I’ll show you.”

The difference between Ask.fm and Snapchat is significant. Ask.fm allows written conversation to remain online. But Snapchat, a hugely popular social media app, causes texts – evidence, in criminal cases – to vanish within 10 seconds.

Weeks later, police turn Callahan’s digital tools against him. Pretending to be Jane Doe, a detective texts Callahan and suggests he drop by the Doe home. The sting works. Callahan is arrested and jailed.

But by evening, Jane Doe’s family discovers the suspect has already been released on bail.

**Next: For victims, the assault is only the beginning of the trauma.**



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