I Am The Blogger Who Allegedly “Complicated” The Steubenville Gang Rape Case -- And I Wouldn't Change a Thing

The Steubenville rape case has come to an end and the verdict has been heard.

Two Ohio high school football players were found guilty of raping a drunk 16-year-old girl.

On Sunday, Judge Thomas Lipps ruled that Trent Mays, 17, and Ma'Lik Richmond, 16, digitally penetrated the West Virginia teenager known only as "Jane Doe."

Their punishment? Richmond will be held at a juvenile detention facility for at least a year and Mays for at least two years. Both are required to register as juvenile sex offenders, and the juvenile system can hold them until they are 21 years old.

As a blogger who first reported on the Twitter messages surrounding the alcohol-fueled party -- many messages later deleted -- it is sometimes surreal to look back and revisit the events of the past eight months.
When I first wrote about the unbelievable events that took place in this town where I lived for five years -- events which culminated in a passed-out female minor, Jane Doe, being carried around unconscious as men from the high school football team boasted about rape on video, tweeted jokes about violating her and, at one point, disgustingly said how "some people deserve" to be urinated on, I had NO clue the firestorm that it would cause.

All I wanted was justice for Jane Doe. And now with the verdict in, I am proud to have played any small part in that. And I'm proud of the thousands of people -- from Anonymous to Roseanne -- who rallied to this young woman's defense, even though no one seemed to do so the night that it mattered.

The night she will never get back. The night of her rape. I lived in Steubenville for about half a decade. Over the years since I have moved away, I kept in touch with friends and would occasionally read the local Web sites to see what was happening back in my old hometown.

On August 22, I learned of the arrest of two Steubenville High School football athletes for rape, kidnapping and material containing a nude minor. I would later learn through my online research that the teens had been to a series of end-of-summer parties and the victim was sexually assaulted at a third location.

Today as I read the sickening text messages from the trial -- from men who are not even on trial themselves, I found myself sobbing once again. "How dead is she?" "I wanna see the vid of u hitting her with your weiner." "She looks dead lmao."

Disgusting.

Initially, the media did not present a lot of information about this case and that struck me as odd because I knew from having lived in Steubenville that this was going to be a big deal.

I did a few Google searches and wasn't able to come up with much so I went to the high school football Web site and made a list of names. I read a few local high school forums to get a gist of who was who and then started searching Twitter. I figured I'd see what the other kids were saying about the case. You can learn a lot through these conversations. Through researching, I was able to determine the boys' names and found their accounts on Twitter. The accounts were unprotected, and I started clicking through Twitter conversations. I was amazed at how much information I was able to obtain with the first two hours of searching. I had a decent idea by that time of what parties they were at, some of the names of those in attendance and knew that a photograph had been circulated.

I actually stayed up all night reading Twitter accounts. By the time I reached party-goer Michael Nodianos' Twitter account, I was horrified.
I could not believe some of the things this young man was saying about this young girl. Things like “some people deserve to be peed on #whoareyou” and “you don't sleep through a wang in the butthole.” I also knew that there was a 12:29-minute-long video as I had found a copy of the thumbnail on Google cache, and was mortified that it had been tagged with words such as “drunk” “rape” and “offensive.”

I just remember thinking to myself -- who raised these kids and why aren't more kids arrested? And the ultimate question: If so many kids were tweeting about this rape, WHY DIDN'T ANYONE DO ANYTHING? TO STOP IT?

As I got deeper into the Twitter "evidence" -- because that's clearly what it was, I began screengrabbing the tweets, wondering if they would be taken down later. It turns out, I was right. There were a significant number of Twitter accounts discussing the night in question, and others posturing that if their friends got in trouble for this they were going to be “pissed.” Girls were calling the victim a whore, and I was absolutely overwhelmed at the amount of information that was put out on the Internet by the time I went to bed that afternoon.

I literally was up all night saving screenshots and taking notes. With each student account I read, the more horrified that I was. It was very difficult for me to even comprehend that anyone could be this callous -- let alone a child. After the first blog post I did, I got a surge of traffic on the Steubenville story. People in town were seeking out information about the case because the media was not providing the information about the critical role social media had played into the case.

During my research, I had also discovered evidence of a second assault that took place last April. Nodianos actually makes reference to the 'rape at Palooza' in his 12-minute video. I started
posting screenshots on my blog from the various Twitter accounts, and that is when people really became enraged.

It is one thing to hear the rumors, but I think when people actually saw the tweets, and the vile things that were said with their own eyes, it really drove home just how disgusting the behavior of these kids was that night. Soon locals began contacting me stating that they believed there was a cover-up into investigation of the charges. That's not a new allegation for Steubenville. There is also a belief among residents of Steubenville that high school athletes are given a pass when it comes to accountability for bad behavior.

My articles were based on my firsthand knowledge of the area, as well as many, many emails from residents seeking to dissect truth from gossip. EVERYONE in town was talking about this case. My blog became the Internet version of a local coffee shop where people could anonymously discuss theories and other information they had heard, but their ultimate yearning was that the truth be revealed. They were concerned that the students would be given leniency because of who they were and how they were connected to the football program.

There were rumors that Coach Reno Saccoccia knew about the incident and rather than benching the students involved he allowed them to continue their football season minus one game -- and later during trial testimony we were to find out that this was true. Having lived in Steubenville, I have personal knowledge of the football culture there. I saw it -- I experienced it and to be honest, I was creeped out by it. Men who were 20 years out of high school seemed to be still living in the moment of when the full-capacity stadium used to cheer loudly for them. Perhaps they are holding onto the days when they were admired and adulated, only to grow up and be stuck in a town that now has few jobs and little to do other than head back to that elaborate 10,000 seat stadium on Friday nights and relive their glory days.

If you ask any little boy in Steubenville what he wants to be when he grows up, you will likely hear “a Big Red football player.” Student athletes have referred to themselves on Twitter as “#steubenvillestarsforlife.”

They didn't just decide one day that they were superstars. This is a culture that has bred this attitude, and it is not well received when people discuss it critically. A quick read of some of the local high school football forums will introduce you to the rivalry between the various local high school teams. So, when I talked about the football culture negatively in light of this case, to say it was not received well is an understatement. I never expected this case to take on the life that it has. I have been left weeping and filled with so much pride as I watched the Steubenville rallies and listened to the stories of other victims who were too afraid to come forward. It was absolutely amazing to see the streets of downtown Steubenville filled with supporters from all over the country supporting Jane Doe -- and all Jane Does.

I have received emails from around the world by people who have been moved by this case in some form or another. This case has created a social awareness about rape culture, and it has opened dialogues between parents and their children that it's okay to be the lone man standing as long as you STAND.
It has forced parents to become more informed about how their children are using social media and how detrimental ones’ digital footprint can be, and it has given people an opportunity to speak out against injustice.

It has been a long, tumultuous and oftentimes agonizing journey that came with great cost to my family and myself personally and physically. My family and I are no different than others. We have feelings and compassion, unlike so many who stood by and chose to do nothing that night – or the adults who re-victimized Jane Doe by making excuses for the abhorrent behavior of their own children.
I was targeted for speaking of that which should not be spoken, and as I sit here writing this, Jane Doe is receiving not only death threats from locals, but is also being maligned by Big Red students because their friends were convicted.

THIS is the sort of behavior that has caused the world outside of the Big Red bubble to recoil in disgust.

And it's what has caused my world to be turned upside down.

I continued to cover the case on my blog, which had turned into a town hall of sorts. In October, I received a phone call from a friend and my “hello” was answered with, “Did you get sued?” I had no clue what my friend was talking about and I laughed and I said no. Jokingly I asked, “What did I do now?”

She told me that WTOV9 had just announced on the news that myself and 25 anonymous commenters from my blog were being sued for defamation of character. I think I laughed because I was shocked that anyone would file a defamation suit — especially since the lawsuit was filed by the man who it turns out was Jane Doe's ex-boyfriend and tweeted the now infamous photo of her appearing lifeless and being carried like an animal.

My friends took to social media to tweet about the defamation case, and through the amazing Ken White and popehat.com I was able to assemble an amazing team of lawyers to assist in my defense of the right to free speech: Thomas Haren, Jeffrey Nye, and Marc Randazza. I was so worried about my anonymous commenters being retaliated against if their identities were revealed.

I spent countless hours emailing or on the phone reassuring them that we were going to get through this. I wasn't going to leave them hanging, but I wasn't going to go down without a fight either. We all had the right to talk about this case — and I wanted to protect that right. Through the awesomeness of my attorneys, we were able to involve the Ohio chapter of the ACLU to represent all of the John Doe defendants and the lawsuit was dismissed with prejudice on December 27th.

Hatred is a very negative waste of time, however, it hasn't stopped a small group of citizens of Steubenville from unleashing their fury upon me -- all for standing up for the defenseless Jane Doe on that horrible night which changed her life forever.

I have been called a "slut," a "drunk," a "bitch with an agenda," a "liar" and someone who hates Big Red so bad that my desire was to bring down their football program. I was accused in a letter to the editor in the local paper as using my blog as a vehicle which “has lent itself to character assassination and has begun to resemble a lynch mob.”

I was hospitalized for a week in November by the stress of the lawsuit that exacerbated a 20-year old health condition, and accused of lying about it to get attention. My mother was followed around for a week by private investigators hired by the family suing me and my photo was taken to business locations in the area asking, “Have you seen her?”
My mother and brother have been harassed online, and my recently deceased stepfather's address and phone number were posted online. What is more despicable about posting his information is that he had just been in a horrible car accident, which ultimately took his life a month later.

Perhaps most ridiculously, I was accused of “complicating” the case because I posted the screen captures of content that these kids willingly posted themselves.

My best friend disavowed our friendship over this case. Imagine my utter devastation and hurt when I realized she was participating in some of the mud slinging against me. Her mother even joined the fray and used Twitter to state what a “fat sweat hog” and “bitch” I was, and how she wished I would “get AIDS and die a slow death.”

So would I do it all over again? ABSOLUTELY. The verdict is finally in, but this story is far from over. The Ohio Attorney General's office has ordered a grand jury to convene in April to investigate additional charges against others.

Today is one that is filled with many emotions: joy that Jane Doe is able to move on with her life now; sadness and compassion for all of the lives that were forever changed because of a night of bad decisions, and contempt for those who did nothing to stop this terrible chain of events. Because at the end of the day, the only agenda I have is simple.

Let's prevent another Jane Doe from happening ever again. Let's comfort the ones brave enough to stand up in the face of adversity. And let's encourage all the Jane Does too afraid to come forward to have renewed strength and courage in the wake of the Steubenville verdict.

Because you are not alone.