

Former prosecutor, judge on Wall HS football hazing probe: Stop shaming an entire town

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We are proud parents who raised our three kids in Wall Township for 15 years. We also have been asked to be the voice for a number of the children who are being painted as villains for no reason other than their affiliation with the Wall Football Team. Let's start here: It's time we stopped shaming an entire town, an entire school system, an entire team for the alleged acts of a few. Enough already. So, before you pick up that stone to throw at a child who happens to be wearing a Wall Football jacket, think long and hard about the message you're sending to your own kids. You're telling them that facts don't matter. That public condemnation is warranted before any investigation is complete. Put down your stones.

By painting with such a broad brush, by generalizing that the entire Wall Football Team is complicit in any alleged misconduct, it tramples upon the cornerstone of our justice system by essentially requiring innocent children to come forward and defend themselves against what is nothing short of a public onslaught. We're telling these kids, "you're guilty until proven otherwise" and we are destroying — with words and innuendo — an entire town in the process.

For a child, who may have done nothing wrong except be part of a team, imagine the helplessness we're perpetuating. And when kids feel helpless, when they've done nothing wrong, we as parents have a responsibility to protect them too. We are adding to the list of victims of this tragedy.

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We all need to take greater care with the labels we use so readily, especially when our only information source is social media or sound bites. To use an analogy, not everyone who's in a bank at the time of a bank robbery is a bank robber; some might be complicit, but you don't automatically slap a label on the ones who had nothing to do with it just because of proximity. So why are we doing that with our children, here? We justify our rush to judgment by saying "there's a toxic culture" in Wall, pulling together a handful of examples that we heard or read somewhere.

And while we dispute the conclusory premise that Wall culture is “toxic,” either way it doesn’t mean we abandon the rule of law when it comes to our kids.

We tell our kids that words matter, but we need to start taking our own advice: this isn’t a town of delinquents, this isn’t a team of delinquents, or even a group of delinquents. This isn’t a toxic town with toxic people doing terrible things. The opposite is true. Just a few weeks back, we were exalting Wall culture with heartwarming stories about the wonderful Wall High School homecoming king these students elected. These Wall kids are just like your kids: they have hopes and dreams and ambitions, they have good days and bad days. We seem to have short memories of the good days.

And before you tell us, “there are videos,” we are glad there are. That’s how you investigate — with a scalpel, not a sledgehammer. Those videos will show exactly what’s going on, and whether there’s enough there to charge anyone. But by then, it will be too late to apologize to these other kids.