

WALL

'Put down your stones': Ex-law officials urge patience amid Wall HS football hazing probe

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Monmouth County's former top law enforcement officer and his ex-juvenile court judge wife, who raised children in a Wall School District community now riven by allegations of hazing and abuse by some members of the high school football team, warn in an op-ed article Monday against "shaming an entire town, an entire school system, an entire team."

Decrying a "rush to judgment" in the weeks-old investigation into allegations of locker room hazing and abuse, ex-Monmouth County Prosecutor Christopher Gramiccioni and former Family Court Judge Deborah Gramiccioni took aim at those who had prejudged the case and painted "with such a broad brush," harming students who had nothing to do with the alleged wrongdoing.

"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," the couple wrote in the opinion piece published by the Asbury Park Press.

The Gramiccionis, both longtime top law officers and public officials in New Jersey, are co-partners in the law firm Kingston Coventry, with offices in Parsippany and Manasquan, and Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.

"Several of the uninvolved high school football players and their families" have hired the Gramiccionis to "try to represent their interest," Christopher Gramiccioni said in an interview with the Press. He and his wife also are members of the Wall community and raised their children in the township for 15 years.

"What has essentially been happening is that we're generalizing that the entire Wall football team has done something wrong," said Deborah Gramiccioni, a former Superior Court judge who had been assigned to Family Court in Ocean County, and a former prosecutor as well.

"By painting with such a broad brush, it really tramples on the cornerstone of our justice system ... because it forces these kids to come forward and defend themselves against the public onslaught," she said.

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While the investigation — by the very office Christopher Gramiccioni once led — into the allegations is ongoing, the school district has suspended three football coaches and placed the athletic director on leave. It also prompted the cancellation of two football games, including the Thanksgiving Day matchup with rival Manasquan, effectively ending Wall's season.

Last week, Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office announced the investigation had been taken away from local police to avoid the appearance of impropriety because two of the coaches involved had police ties.

At once, little has been made public about what claims are being investigated. Several media accounts have relied on rumors, unidentified sources and descriptions of cellphone videos purporting to depict student conduct at the center of the inquiries.

The couple addressed the videos in their opinion article.

"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," they wrote.

They called on the community to let the investigation by the Monmouth County prosecutor's office run its course and to resist making broad assumptions about what transpired.

"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," the couple wrote. "This isn't a toxic town with toxic people doing terrible things."

Since Board President Ralph Addonizio first acknowledged two weeks ago that an investigation was underway related to a "student matter," district leadership had been silent about details of the case.

At a school board meeting Nov. 16, parents and residents expressed frustration and anger about how the investigation evolved and how it has impacted students. Several alumni talked about hazing and abuse when they attended the high school.

School officials have been criticized for covering up wrongful conduct and, alternately, spreading unsubstantiated charges. School officials have denied that they have acted improperly and said they are constrained by student privacy rules.

Christopher Gramiccioni, who led the Monmouth County prosecutor's office for about nine years, said people should let the investigation by law enforcement play itself out.

"If there's something there then, of course, I'm sure everybody can agree that you want that to be properly addressed," he told the Press. "But we can also agree that it isn't fair to tear every single person who happened to play football, or happened to be a Wall athlete just as a result of what's currently under investigation."

It is "especially damaging to young adolescents," he said.

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