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The Protector

Alex Harrison survived child sexual abuse at the hands of his high school tennis coach. Now he is seeking justice, for himself and others.

Daniel Dreifuss for The New York Times

By David W. Chen

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SANTA BARBARA, Calif. — It was late in a long, agonizing day of testimony, and the defense lawyer wanted to know if the young man on the witness stand felt ashamed after his high school tennis coach gave him a massage.

The 21-year-old witness was testifying as John Doe to protect his identity. He said he was more embarrassed than ashamed. He never wanted his coach to touch him. He should have said something.

“I really saw myself as wanting to be a leader,” said Doe, three years out of high school and dressed in a suit. “I was the team captain of the tennis team in my senior year. I had been an editor. …”

People in the gallery began to snicker.

“I’ll ask you to leave the courtroom if you cannot maintain your composure,” the judge warned.

Doe gathered himself. The people in court had been his teammates and friends and their parents. Now they were ridiculing him simply for saying what his coach had done to him when he was a teenage boy.

When the courtroom quieted, he continued. “I feel that someone who’s a leader wouldn’t, you know, allow someone else to do something that they were uncomfortable with.”

The case ended in a mistrial, and the coach was set free. But John Doe would remember that day, would remember how it felt to tell the painful truth and then be cross-examined and mocked.

The Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, Calif., where the first trial was held. Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

More than a decade later, Doe is speaking out again, this time in his own name: Alexander Harrison.

In an interview near his new job here, and in phone interviews over the past year, Harrison, now 35, chronicled his journey: how his coach exploited him and crushed his spirit; how he lost faith in institutions; and how he then turned to institutions to hold the coach accountable.

Now it is Harrison who protects others.

'A Fight for My Life'

Before he became, like Lawrence G. Nassar, the U.S.A. Gymnastics team doctor, a symbol of the perniciousness of sexual abuse in youth sports, Normandie Burgos was a popular coach and gym teacher at Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, Calif.

A former top-level junior college player who boasted of his time playing tennis professionally in Australia, he emphasized intense conditioning and strategy, often recommending the book "Winning Ugly," by the tennis star Brad Gilbert. Parents lauded Burgos for transforming a middling squad into a Marin County juggernaut while demanding good grades from his players.

Alex Harrison took up tennis in middle school and quickly got so good that he was one of only two freshmen to make the Tamalpais High School varsity squad. He often played first singles, wielding a big inside-out forehand and an all-court game modeled after Pete Sampras's.

"Alex is always the first to arrive and the last to leave," Burgos told The San Francisco Chronicle in 2004. "We practice six days a week and we really work hard and he never complains."

Harrison grew up in Mill Valley, north of San Francisco over the Golden Gate Bridge, where the weather is ideal for tennis. His mother, a court reporter, and father, an engineer, bought him private tennis lessons with Burgos, and soon he aspired to play in college.

When Harrison's parents divorced, Burgos told 14-year-old Alex he could confide in him, friend to friend. Gifts materialized: a windbreaker, a copy of "Winning Ugly" and, unexpectedly, some hair gel and hair spray. Harrison also received Wimbledon-like whites — polo shirts and shorts — so he could dress appropriately to hit with top-level players at private clubs. Much later, Harrison would wonder whether Burgos had been grooming him to ensure future cooperation and silence.

When Harrison hurt his elbow and rotator cuff, Burgos regularly massaged the injured areas in his office near the boys' locker room. Harrison wore boxers, tennis shorts and a T-shirt even though Burgos said it was normal for athletes to be naked during massages. Harrison became uneasy when Burgos complimented his V-shaped abdomen. And when Burgos asked him about his libido.

"I froze up and without thinking said it was fine — very flat, a one-word answer," Harrison recalled.

The boys' tennis team pages in Alex Harrison's Tamalpais High School yearbooks from 2001 and 2002. Burgos is seen on the upper right. Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

Once, as Harrison lay face up on a bench, Burgos strapped a mask over his eyes, supposedly to help him relax. In a report, a police investigator described what happened next, using the same pseudonym that Harrison would later use in court: "Doe continued to explain to me that Burgos, in an attempt to rub his 'tendons,' would rub up against his 'flaccid penis,' which made Doe really uncomfortable."

"I had a tremendous fear that he would just rape me, and I remember being afraid that it would be a fight for my life," Harrison recalled. He was 5-foot-10 and 135 pounds. Burgos had 45 pounds on him.

A key began to unlock the door. Burgos tossed the mask inside a locker, then returned to a supine Harrison, just as the school's athletic director entered. Burgos claimed they were stretching.

On other occasions, when Burgos touched Harrison in uncomfortable ways, Burgos would claim that he was just measuring his body fat, or massaging him in the way Sampras's coach massaged him. Harrison felt powerless to call out Burgos's lies.

"I'd have to put at risk having him as my coach, and I'd lose all of the connections he had with other coaches," he later testified.

Harrison needed those connections for college tennis, and didn't want to ruin his teammates' chances, either. Only later would Harrison understand that victims always felt they had reasons to keep their abuse secret.

From Shutting Down to Speaking Up

Harrison committed to play tennis at the University of Chicago. A fresh start, he hoped.

It didn't work out that way. After surpassing a 4.0 grade-point average in high school, he felt his motivation slipping. He lost his drive and no longer trusted authority figures.

"I've seen where that road takes me, and it's horrible," he said.

Harrison's chronic injuries worsened, and he started having nightmares about Burgos. Even watching tennis became unbearable.

After his sophomore year, he quit tennis and transferred to Claremont McKenna College. But Burgos's transgressions stayed with him like a fever. He called Tamalpais High School to warn them about Burgos, but it was closed for the summer.

Harrison thought of his brother, 10 years his junior, who had become interested in tennis.

“If I’m worried about my brother, then what about everyone else’s brother, everyone else’s son?” he said.

Finally, he found a way to tell his secret: He told his doctor, and the doctor informed the police. He then asked his divorced parents to meet — without the younger brother present.

When the Mill Valley police asked Harrison to write a statement, he took three days to compose his thoughts. He parked on a random street, the car radio turned off, to avoid any emotional triggers. Then he cried as he committed his story to four handwritten pages.

What happened next has troubled Harrison ever since. The police asked him to call Burgos, a common tactic in sexual assault investigations, to see if he would admit to criminal behavior. They suggested he lead Burgos on by saying he was now confused about his sexuality even though he knew he was straight.

Harrison, then 20, agreed to make the call, but refused to lie. He prided himself on honesty. And he believed that in a battle for credibility with someone as popular as Burgos, the truth was his best weapon.

He made the call from the police station on the evening of Aug. 2, 2006, three years after the last of the touching incidents occurred.

The Mill Valley Police Department, where Harrison first reported the sexual assault. Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

Harrison, nervous and confrontational, told Burgos he had been “weirded out” by the massages and wanted to know “what the hell was going on”: “I need to get this right now or I’m going to have to either talk to the school or talk to the police.”

Burgos suggested meeting. Harrison refused. “I don’t wanna ever have contact with you again.”

Harrison mentioned the time he and Burgos traveled to visit a college and Burgos booked them into a room with one bed. Harrison objected. Burgos stayed elsewhere, according to the transcript of the call.

“It boggles my mind that in all of that San Diego area that you can’t find one room with two beds,” Harrison said.

Burgos seemed taken aback.

“I don’t know how you can feel that way especially ’cause of those, all those years we spent together,” he said.

Harrison persisted. “I just feel like viol — I feel taken advantage of.”

“I totally love you,” Burgos responded. “Like you could be my son.”

Burgos was arrested two weeks later and charged with lewd and lascivious conduct and sexual battery. He was placed on leave, and his teaching credentials were later revoked.

‘These Are Not Stupid Parents’

Harrison experienced what he would later realize is a common phenomenon: In cases involving an abuser who is popular, the community often sides with the abuser.

Months after Burgos’s arrest, the Tamalpais High School tennis team, along with many parents, attended a preliminary hearing to support him. The students spent the morning absorbing the charges facing their coach, then trooped to the tennis courts and defeated their archrival in the county championship. Burgos even made it to the hardcourts — after his long day as a defendant — to pose for team photos.

“They really played this one for Burgos — you can see how much they respect him,” Bill Washauer, an assistant to Burgos who had assumed the head coaching job, told The Marin Independent Journal.

Burgos’s defense was that he was not a sexual abuser, but simply a gay man victimized by homophobia. Harrison had misunderstood Burgos’s intentions and overreacted. Besides, the defense suggested, any touching was fleeting and unintentional.

Harrison, distraught at being perceived as homophobic or vindictive, emailed the players and parents who had packed the proceedings.

“I have no incentive to lie about what happened,” he wrote. “I hope that at the very least those of you reading this can accept the possibility that Burgos is not the great guy that many of you think he is.”

No one hit reply.

David Rabin, a Tamalpais High School tennis player who graduated a year ahead of Harrison, said Harrison was “excommunicated” — even though Burgos had always praised Harrison as a trustworthy scholar-athlete.

Richard Rabin, left, and his brother, David, were high school tennis teammates of Harrison's. Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

"There was a certain level of cognitive dissonance," said Rabin, who is now a psychiatrist, neuroscientist and trauma expert. "It was too painful for them to admit that they were willing to allow their child to spend time with this man, because what would that say about them?"

He added: "This is a blemish on the community. They retraumatized a young adult."

As the trial approached, Harrison struggled with whether to testify.

"I was so anxious where I was like, I don't know if I can survive this," he recalled.

He searched for criminal defense lawyers, picked a random Harvard Law graduate and called from his car, so his roommates couldn't eavesdrop. Could I be arrested, he asked, if I failed to show up? The answer was no; since he hadn't been subpoenaed, he could opt out.

Harrison decided to go through with it. So did another former Tamalpais High School student who alleged that Burgos had blindfolded him and touched him inappropriately.

Jurors could not reach a unanimous verdict, though, and a mistrial was declared in November 2010, seven years after the abuse happened and four years after Harrison went to the police. Dozens of parents petitioned the school district to rehire Burgos, to no avail.

“These are not stupid parents,” one parent was quoted as saying. “They are successful, smart people who would never entrust their children with anyone who wasn’t reliable and supportive.”

Harrison simmered with a need to confront Burgos — in person, not over the phone.

One day he spotted Burgos at the public courts in Sausalito, leading a practice with about 30 young players. He opened the chain-link gate and walked purposefully up to Burgos, who was standing between two courts, near the net.

Harrison demanded that Burgos apologize for what he did to him. Burgos, avoiding eye contact, said he could not talk to him. Harrison pressed on: The case is over. You can’t get in trouble for admitting what you’ve done. Have the decency to apologize.

Burgos’s students began forming a wall between the two men. They were joined by several instructors who had once been Harrison’s Red Tailed Hawks teammates. Together, they shoved Harrison in the chest. A few threatened to call the police.

“I remember the irony — they were going to call the police on me?” Harrison said. “Really?”

Harrison uncharacteristically raised his voice, “as strong as I could,” so everyone could hear him over the commotion. There he was, a grown man, surrounded by young people in tennis gear, in a place that had once been his domain, shouting at Burgos to give him back his childhood.

“I yelled out that he molested me, he’s a child molester,” he said. “I wanted to warn them.”

The M.L.K. tennis courts in Sausalito, where Harrison confronted Burgos face to face. Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

Harrison returned to his car, crestfallen. From then on, he would pursue a much more strategic and thoughtful approach to getting justice.

That fall, he returned to U.C.L.A. for his third year of law school.

'Not Just Another Case'

A Myers-Briggs-like career assessment once suggested that Harrison's patron saint was Paul Newman, his ideal job journalist or lawyer.

And his personality? Protector.

He majored in government in college and thought about a career in national security, then headed to law school. Before his final year, he was an intern with the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

"I felt like I could bring something to a local prosecutor's office," he said. "There are plenty of prosecutors who have been victims of crime but haven't gone through the legal process or the public scrutiny of a trial. I have been in those shoes."

After passing the California bar in 2012, Harrison joined the Orange County district attorney's office and asked to be assigned to sex crimes. He told close colleagues about his experiences with Burgos, but most people he worked with didn't know he had been a victim.

To prepare for trials, he interviewed people in his messy office, shirt sleeves rolled up, face to face, rather than in a sterile conference room.

"You could almost visualize Alex being the victim himself — he would bend his body in his chair to make sure he's level with that person," said Tom Andrews, an investigator and former Oakland, Calif., police officer. "He treated the victims like gold — 32 years in the business, not too many D.A.s did that."

Alley Muñoz, who until last month was a victim advocate for Waymakers, a nonprofit which supports victims through the court process, said Harrison was unusually empathetic and meticulous.

"After he was hired he came into my cubicle and he said: 'I want to get to know these victims. I want to know what services you offer,'" she said. "They were not just another case or another number."

Sometimes, Harrison's youthful bearing surprised people in court.

"He's got this baby face, and my first impression was — oh, buddy, you're going to get torn up when you go up against one of the high-end old defense attorneys," said Craig Lawler, an investigator. "That was not the case. Oh my Lord, it was like unleashing a pit bull."

In a 2019 child molestation case, the defense summoned a psychologist from California State University, Northridge. Children were not reliable court witnesses, the expert claimed, because they could get confused.

Harrison challenged every paper published by the expert. The psychologist conceded that he had never interviewed a child who had been sexually abused, nor done any advanced forensic training.

“You have no real-world experience,” Harrison told the expert. The defendant was found guilty.

Another Arrest

In July 2017, after Harrison returned from a family vacation to Greece, his then-girlfriend told him something had happened in his absence.

Burgos had been arrested again.

“I remember there being dead air,” Harrison said. “I remember feeling disconnected from myself for days.”

This time, the charges were much more serious than in the Marin case a decade earlier. One boy, a star tennis player, said Burgos had demanded oral sex starting when he was 14. When he refused, Burgos withheld gear and threatened to derail his college prospects.

“The same freaking pattern in terms of the gifts, the grooming, the stretching, the massage,” Harrison recalled.

Another tennis player did for the police what Harrison had refused to do years earlier: He claimed that he missed the intimacy he’d had with Burgos. Burgos acknowledged criminal sex acts with the boy, and the police moved in.

Guilt enveloped Harrison. If only he had done a better job on the pretext phone call. If only he had testified better at the first trial.

The second trial began in April 2019 in Contra Costa County Superior Court. Harrison and the other victim from the earlier case were called as witnesses under a California law that allows prosecutors to introduce testimony about a defendant’s past sexual misconduct.

Jordan R. Sanders, the deputy district attorney who prosecuted Burgos. Cayce Clifford for The New York Times

The other victim said he started drinking after being violated. He was recruited to play a college sport but flunked out. He lost trust in the judicial process and felt angry about anything out of his control.

“I have to go back thinking about myself, that shy little kid standing in the office with his pants down,” he said. “I’m still incredibly insecure with the fact that this was only one day, one thing that happened to me that still holds such an emotional grip on me.”

When Harrison took the stand, identified in court only by his initials, A.H., Jordan R. Sanders, a Contra Costa deputy district attorney, asked him where he grew up. Years of emotion spilled out.

“I was born and raised in Mill Valley, California,” he said, before sobbing and asking for water.

After the weeklong trial, the jury deliberated for two days before finding Burgos guilty of 60 counts of child molestation. Judge Charles B. Burch sentenced him to 255 years in prison. Burgos is appealing, said Eric R. Larson, his court-appointed appellate lawyer.

The two victims from the second trial sued Burgos and the United States Tennis Association for civil damages, settling in late May for an undisclosed amount. One, Stevie Gould, went public with his story in early 2020.

Thirteen Years to the Day

Harrison sued the Tamalpais Union High School District on June 1, 2020 — 13 years to the day after he was mocked in court — alleging negligence over childhood sexual assault. Tara Taupier, the district’s superintendent, said she could not comment.

A recent California law gives adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse a three-year window to file claims, starting in January 2020, said Mark Boskovich, one of Harrison’s lawyers. The law has already prompted thousands of cases, and its sponsor, Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, a San Diego Democrat, anticipates more related to coaches.

“When people start thinking about childhood sexual assault, they think first about the church, then the Boy Scouts, but there were a lot of people involved in youth sports,” she said.

Harrison sued Tamalpais High School last year. Cayce Clifford for The New York Times

Harrison left his job in August to work on personal injury cases, employment law and other matters at a private firm. But he missed the mission, and recently signed on as a deputy district attorney in Santa Barbara County. His brief: serious and violent crimes, such as homicides. (He asked that his face not be shown with this article because of the nature of his work.)

Off-duty, Harrison decompresses by hiking, biking and exploring new places in the secondhand Toyota that he has had since he became a prosecutor, 120,000 miles ago. On trivia nights at bars with friends, he excels in history, politics and sports; music and pop culture, not so much. He is also competitive at board games that prize strategy and deduction like Avalon, Catan and Terraforming Mars.

Still, the demands on a local prosecutor can be punishing, with work often spilling into the evenings and weekends. Witnesses and defendants quickly come and go. Cases are postponed. Argued. Adjudicated.

But moments do linger.

A few weeks after one particularly draining trial, Harrison learned that homemade cookies and a handwritten card had been dropped off for him. They were from an underage victim who had testified and his family.

Harrison, a stickler about the office's policy on gifts, gave the cookies away. But he kept the card.

Thank you for caring so much and believing in me, wrote the victim, who had been identified in court as John Doe, just as Harrison was all those years ago.