

Statement by Jessica Howard to the United States Senate Judiciary Committee

March 28, 2017

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak to you.

The day I found my sport, rhythmic gymnastics, was the day I fell in love with it. Those first few years of training were pure bliss, but to achieve my goal of becoming a world-class athlete, I needed to switch to an elite coach. My first practice with my new coach was so intense that I spent the following two days vomiting and unable to make it back to practice. When I did return, the work began. By age 15, I was U.S. National champion, a position I held for three years.

But the fear and intimidation that permeated my training sessions took a toll, as did the physical pain. By the time I reached World Championships in 1999, my hips hurt so badly that at times I could barely walk.

At those World Championships when I was just 15, I had a rough practice two days before the competition. My coach called me into her room, where the head of our program was also present. She yelled at me so severely that I sat perfectly still, and my only movement was to pick the skin from my finger. Among other things, she told me I was an embarrassment to my county, my family and to her, that she had never been so humiliated coaching someone as she was of me, and that they would put me on a plane home and kick me off the team the next day if my practice wasn't better. By the end of the meeting my finger was bloody and I wanted to jump out the window.

After those World Championships, USA Gymnastics suggested I go to Karolyi ranch to see Dr. Larry Nassar, renowned for his work with the women's gymnastics team, to help with my hip pain. Parents did not go to the ranch, so I went by myself. I was just thankful to have a few days away from my coach. I don't remember any adult taking responsibility for me, and the first time I met Dr. Nassar, I immediately trusted him. He was the premier USA Gymnastics doctor with an international reputation, and I felt lucky to have been invited to the ranch to work with him.

For our first appointment, he asked me to wear loose shorts and no underwear. That seemed strange, but I obeyed. As in training, I wanted to be perfect, He began to massage my legs, and then quickly moved inwards on my thighs. He then massaged his way into me. I was rigid and uncomfortable, but I didn't realize what was happening. I was confused, and thought that it must just be what had to happen. This scenario happened repeatedly over the course of my week at the ranch. At no time was there ever another adult in the room. Coming off of a difficult year of training, Dr. Nassar acted as the good guy, supporting me emotionally and promising me relief from the pain. Now I know that in actuality he expertly abused me under the guise of "treatment."

I trusted USA Gymnastics. But I was sexually abused, as were so many other athletes. More than 100 young women and girls have now come forward to accuse Dr. Nassar of sexual assault. And the abuse was not limited to Dr. Nassar. According to more than 5,600 pages of USAG records released to the IndyStar on March 3rd after a lengthy court battle, some of the 54 coaches with sexual abuse complaint files spanning ten years weren't banned from gymnastics until years after USA Gymnastics discovered they were convicted of crimes against children.

As an adult, I spent years serving on the USA Gymnastics Board of Directors with a mission of protecting children in my sport from the psychological abuse that I endured. But the meetings seemed to revolve around two things: money and medals. When a sexual abuse case came up during my time on the board, the concern was about the reputation of the coach – not the accusation of the athlete. As I have attempted to come to terms with what happened to me as a teenager, it has become glaringly obvious that USA Gymnastics has not done nearly enough to protect athletes from any form of abuse.

To show they are serious about making institution-wide changes that will create a safe environment for athletes, USA Gymnastics must be accountable and required by law to adopt a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual abuse. Accusations of child abuse must be reported to the law enforcement authorities immediately. It took five weeks for USA Gymnastics to report Dr. Nassar to the FBI when suspicions were raised, only after conducting its own internal investigation. Protecting all children in sports from abuse is of paramount importance. That is why this bill is so vital – because it requires amateur athletic governing bodies to

immediately report allegations of sexual abuse, and will make it easier for victims to report. This legislation will also greatly help victims by extending the statute of limitations, giving athletes who were abused as children an opportunity to seek justice when they have a better understanding of what happened to them.

There is nothing more motivating and powerful than an Olympic dream. But there is a long life to live after the span of a gymnastics career. My post gymnastics life has been fraught with issues that stem from the abuse I endured as a young teenager. It should be the priority of those in power to make sure that an athlete's post-sport life is not spent dealing with the crippling effects of abuse.

Thank you for your efforts to protect vulnerable young athletes.