Office of the Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan’s Statement on Phoebe Prince Case.

Mullins Center, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
May 5, 2011

Good Afternoon, I am David Sullivan, District Attorney for the Northwestern District.

First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge that the resolution of each of these cases would not have been possible without the exceptional strength and capacity for compassion exhibited by the O’Brien-Prince family. These resolutions were reached only after thorough consultation with the family, and have their full approval and support.

Over fifteen months ago the tragic death of Phoebe Prince set in motion the criminal prosecution of six teenagers. Phoebe was a beautiful, brilliant, kind-hearted, and sensitive 15 year old girl who had her whole life ahead of her. We are here, in no small part, because her mother Anne O’Brien and father Jeremy Prince, had the courage and fortitude to look beyond their own grief and pain to help prosecute these cases on behalf of their daughter.

Since these proceedings were first commenced in March 2010, the O’Brien-Prince family has never wavered in what they hoped would be achieved through these cases: a public recognition of wrongdoing; an acceptance of responsibility from the defendants; and a heightened awareness of the harmful consequences of bullying. These were the same goals shared by then-District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel, who’s Office initiated these proceedings. We were entrusted with these cases and my team of prosecutors has fought to achieve these goals for O’Brien-Prince family. Today, we are united in resolving these cases so each of these defendants is held accountable for his or her criminal conduct.

The defendants in these five cases have accepted responsibility for their actions and admitted that they engaged in criminal conduct toward Phoebe Prince in the weeks, days and hours before she took her life.

The prosecution of these cases signifies that bullying and harassment will not be tolerated in our schools; and when it rises to the level of criminal conduct, as it did in these five cases, those responsible will be prosecuted. The criminal charge against the sixth defendant, Austin Renaud, has been dismissed this afternoon upon the request of the O’Brien-Prince family and in the interests of justice.

It is our sincere hope that the resolution of all of these criminal cases will bring some measure of closure for their family as they attempt to cope with the continuing pain of their loss.

The most positive message to have come out of this tragedy is that it has put an international spotlight on bullying and its devastating consequences. This prosecution has also shattered the myths that “bullying is just part of growing up;” “that it affects only a small number of kids;” and that “kids can work it out themselves.”

The era of turning a blind eye to bullying and harassment is over.

As a direct response to both this case and the tragic death of 11 year old Carl Walker-Hoover of Springfield, the Massachusetts Legislature enacted a comprehensive bullying prevention law. The new law requires all schools in the Commonwealth to train staff and implement an effective system for reporting and responding to complaints of bullying.

While it is clear that we cannot legislate kindness or empathy, we can teach our young people that their words and acts have real consequences, both intended and unintended. Whether we are administrators, teachers, students, parents, or community members we are called to be active leaders in making sure that every child who comes and goes to school is in a safe and healthy environment.
Every child has the right to be protected from bullying and it is everyone’s duty to be an active voice in preventing it, and stopping it when it happens.

We have approached these cases in exactly the same way we have in every other case in which my administration has handled since taking office on January 5, 2011.

We have analyzed each case separately, applying the law to the facts, and striving in each case to achieve the greatest measure of justice possible.

We have tempered these dispositions with the mercy, compassion and understanding that the family of the victim has demonstrated throughout this case.

Our justice system is as imperfect as it is human.

Justice will never be fully served in this case because we can never bring Phoebe Prince back to her family, friends, and community.

We now hope, together with the family, that a positive legacy for Phoebe will be achieved and preserved.

We pray that the gift of Phoebe’s life inspires peace and safety for every child, in every school, throughout America and beyond.

David E. Sullivan
District Attorney
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