A REPORTER AT LARGE
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TRIAL BY TWITTER

After high-school football stars were accused of rape, online vigilantes demanded that justice be served. Was it?

BY ARIEL LEVY

Anonymous posted that it wouldn't let "young men who turn to rape as a game or sport get the pass," adding, "This is a call to arms."
ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR

One Saturday last August, a sixteen year-old girl in West Virginia did something that teen-agers do: she told her parents that she was sleeping at another girl's house, across the Ohio River, and then, after her mother dropped her off there, she and a few friends headed into the hot summer night to a party. She brought a bottle of vodka with her, and she used it to spike a slushy that she bought at a gas station on the way to their destination, in a town called Steubenville.

At the party, she met up with a sixteen-year-old named Trent Mays, a good-looking, dark-haired football player with whom she'd been flirting by text and tweet. She'd been "talking to him," a porous term that teen-agers use to refer to a romantic relationship that is unlikely to be exclusive, and can involve spending time together or just courting through social media. A friend of Mays's named Anthony Craig had also been talking to the girl that summer. Months later, a prosecutor asked Craig if he had been dating her, and he replied that some people "may look at it as that." He meant people on the outside of adolescent culture, who have to translate contemporary categories into old-fashioned ones that they can understand.

Like most teen-agers, the girl was very active online: she had profiles on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Prezi, which explained that her favorite color was pink, her favorite movie was "Mean Girls," and her favorite stores were Hollister, Juicy Couture, and Victoria's Secret. "I like anything sparkly," she posted. Trent Mays, a good student with a buzz cut and a belligerent sense of humor, also used Twitter to express his enthusiasms: "There is just something bout girls in jean shorts."

About fifty teen-agers were at the party, and no adults. There were lots of football players and wrestlers from Steubenville High School—Big Red, people call it—and there was lots of liquor and beer. Many of the kids were drinking, but the girl from West Virginia was unusually intoxicated, and people talked about it. At around midnight, the hostess's older brother came in and, according to a senior named Mark Cole, determined that "the party was getting out of hand and said everyone had to leave." Cole decided to drive to another party, nearby, and he was joined by two mainstays of the football team: Mays, the quarterback, and Ma'lik Richmond, a big, soft-spoken sophomore who was the star wide receiver and an honor-roll student. The girl from West Virginia wanted to go, too, and was "very loud" about it, Cole said. "Her friends tried to get her to stay with them, but she screamed and denied and said that she wanted to come with us." One of her friends later told the police that she tried to stop her, "because she's done this before; I was, like, She's not doing this again." But the girl was so set on getting in the car that she became physically combative: "She wanted to go with Trent."

At the next party, she threw up in the bathroom. "She was very drunk," Cole recalled, "like she wasn't fully capable of walking on her own." It was a smaller gathering, of about a dozen teens, and, not long after the group arrived, the host's mother came downstairs and said that anyone who wasn't sleeping over had to go home. Anthony Craig said later that he remembered Mays and Ma'lik Richmond carrying the girl from West Virginia outside.

In front of the house, she sat down in the middle of the street and vomited again. That, she says, is the last thing she remembers about the night of August 11th. She was bewildered when she woke up the next morning on a couch in Mark Cole's basement, naked and unable to find her cell phone. But when her friends came to pick her up, they said, she seemed fine with where she was: lying next to Trent Mays on the couch, where they'd slept under a Steelers blanket.

Two weeks later, a forty-five-year-old blogger named Alexandria Goddard heard that Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond had been arrested for rape; it was all anyone in Steubenville was talking about. Goddard had lived in Steubenville years before, and she retained an interest in what went on there. She had spent her childhood nearby, "in the deep-down bowels of West Virginia," in a house with no running water, and had gone to high school in Columbus. In her sophomore year, she started working in a defense attorney's office, and continued for more than a decade. She always wanted to be a lawyer, but "life got in the way," she said. Fifteen years ago, when she was going through her second divorce, she went to live with her mother, in Steubenville, and got a job as a ward clerk in the emergency room at Ohio Valley Medical Center.

At the hospital—and in Steubenville generally—she found the enthusiasm for Big Red football alarming. "When I saw how the nurses' locker room was bedazzled like a cheerleader's bedroom, I just remember standing there thinking, Oh, my God," Goddard

said. There were posters all over the walls saying "Roll Red Roll," the chant that echoes from Steubenville's Harding Stadium during football games. Though there are fewer than eight hundred students in the high school, the stadium has ten thousand seats—half as many as Madison Square Garden. Each time Big Red scores, a giant statue of a stallion spits out a six-foot flame. Goddard's stepfather served for years on the board of the team's boosters. "Grown men," Goddard said. "Twenty years out of high school and they're still reliving it. They can't get over that their lives suck."

The steel mills that used to keep the local economy thrumming are abandoned now, and the drive into Steubenville, past the few working factories along the Ohio River, gives you the lonely feeling of being left behind. The town's most famous son, Dean Martin, moved away in the nineteen-thirties, but the road that runs along its eastern perimeter bears his name, and other local landmarks evoke his career in the entertainment business: the Bob Evans diner sits across Sunset Boulevard from the Hollywood Plaza. Since 1970, the population of Steubenville has declined forty per cent, to about eighteen thousand. The median income is $33,188, and more than a quarter of the residents live below the poverty line.

At times, the town has seemed so diminished that it was unable to govern itself. In 1997, the Department of Justice cited the police department for excessive use of force, false arrests, and tampering with evidence. Over two decades, according to reports, Steubenville lost or settled forty-eight civil-rights lawsuits, and paid out more than eight hundred thousand dollars in claims. In resolving the Department of Justice's complaint, it became the second city in the country to allow Justice to monitor its police department, an arrangement that lasted until 2005.

But in football Steubenville is triumphant. Big Red has won nine state championships—including three under the current coach, Reno Saccoccia—and its best players are the town's heroes. "It's like you're playing N.F.L. or college," a sophomore on the team told me. "You go into stores, people come up to you asking you questions about Big Red. Everybody knows you." In a town cemetery, one woman's headstone is engraved with "Roll Red Roll."

"When, exactly, did all the stuff you love about me become all the stuff you hate about me?"

At night, Goddard tended bar at Enzo's, a place off the main drag that is not marked by any sign. Regulars are given a key to the front door and run tabs for months, or years. The clients are cops and other locals, many of whom have known each other their whole lives. Goddard—a big woman with striking green eyes and long streaked blond hair, who wears a silver high-heeled-shoe pendant around her neck—was popular there. At the bar and at the hospital, she befriended many of the town's policemen. "Cops are always bringing drunk people into the E.R.," she explained. And when they came into Enzo's after their shift "we had a blast."

But Goddard chafed at the gender dynamics in town. "Women are chattel there," she said. "You know how women behave on 'The Sopranos'? That's Steubenville. You don't have a loud voice and keep a man around. It was difficult with the cop I dated—they have their expectations of what a woman's supposed to be." Once, a guy in town tried to force himself on a friend of hers, so Goddard devised a retaliatory scheme. They lured the man to her house under the pretext of having sex, and, after he took off his clothes, "I had a bottle of habanero sauce we used at the bar for wing night, and I lightly basted his junk," Goddard said. In her recollection, they threw him out on the street, naked, in the cold. "It was snowing like hell, and he had to walk a very long way," she said. "All the guys at the mill were talking about it. After that, men were scared of us for a very long time."

Goddard moved away in 2006. In her new home, in Columbus, she waitressed and worked in offices, but put much of her energy into a blog, where she aired her passionate opinions about criminal justice. She called it Prinniefied.com—"prinnie" as in "princess," which she'd heard used as an insult, and thought was funny. Her tone is by turns earnest ("Cold cases tear at my heart strings") and flippant ("If it looks like a turd and smells like a turd . . . chances are it's a turd"). In 2011, she was captivated by the Caylee Anthony trial, in which a Florida woman was accused of killing her two-year-old daughter; she told me that she was "heavily involved behind the scenes." But before the Steubenville case her site rarely got more than a few hundred hits a day.

After Goddard found out about the arrests, "I got nibby," she said, using local slang for "nosy." She went to the Big Red Web site, found the names of all the members of the football team, and started scouring Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to see if any of them had posted anything about the crime. She saw that Cody Saltsman, an ex-boyfriend of the girl from West Virginia, had uploaded a photograph on Instagram of her being carried by Ma'lik Richmond and Trent Mays. Richmond holds her ankles, Mays grips her wrists; her head droops backward, so that her hair trails on the floor. Mays is grinning. Along with the photograph, Saltsman tweeted, "Never seen anything this sloppy lol."

Another Steubenville student tweeted, "Whores are hilarious." A boy named Pat Pizzoferrato—who had joked at the party that he'd give three dollars to anyone who urinated on the girl while she lay vomiting in the street—tweeted, "If they're getting

'raped' and don't resist then to me it's not rape. I feel bad for her but still." Another boy tweeted, "Some people deserve to be peed on," and Trent Mays re-tweeted the line.

The girl from West Virginia was aware of what people were saying about her. She tweeted, "I will officially never be able to trust a boy ever again." And, "If someone is dangerously inebriated you help them out not take advantage of them. Who the fuck raised these people?" And, "Please everyone just drop it."

But Goddard did not drop it. "That picture is powerful," she said, of the image of Mays and Richmond carrying the girl by her ankles and wrists. "When I first got it, I cried. If I'd been closer to Steubenville, I probably would have driven up there and kicked them in the dickhole." Instead, she left a message for Ed Lulla, a friend of hers who used to be a Steubenville cop and is now an agent with the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigations, presenting the evidence she'd found online. "I gave him thirty-six hours to respond," she said.

When she didn't hear back, she gathered screenshots of all the tweets and Facebook posts she'd discovered and posted them on Prinniefied. She was outraged that only two boys had been arrested. "There were more guys there," she told me. She estimated that fifteen people had "brutally raped" the incapacitated victim. "Do they think because they are Big Red players that the rules don't apply to them?" Goddard wrote online. As she kept posting about the case, more people began to pay attention. Her blog, she told me, "not only is shining a light on the case. It's shining a light on the whole little dirty football culture that exists in their town."

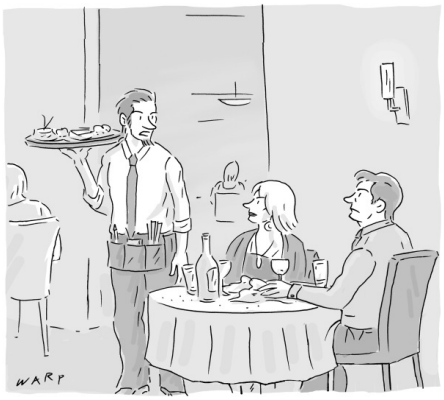
None of the teen-agers who were at the parties reported what happened; for a few days, as the students picked over the evening's events online, the police heard nothing. "Do you know how this started?" Steubenville's chief of police, William McCafferty, a tan, strawberry-blond man, said one afternoon. We were in his office, a windowless room decorated with Snoopy memorabilia and a cymbal signed by the members of Aerosmith. "The victim's mother and dad brought in a—what do you call them? Jump drive? Stuff they had found on Twitter, stuff that had led them to believe 'This is our daughter.'"

When the parents came in, on Tuesday, August 14th, three days after the party, they presented a difficult case. There was no physical evidence of a crime, and the victim had no memory of one occurring. Fifteen years ago, Richmond and Mays would have escaped suspicion: before smartphones and Twitter, rumors floated around high schools and then dissipated, often before adults knew what was real and what was adolescent imagination. As it was, the evidence was limited to tweets, the photograph of Richmond and Mays carrying the girl, and a cell-phone video recorded late on the night of the parties and then uploaded to YouTube. It showcased a ruddy recent graduate of Big Red named Michael Nodianos sitting in a bedroom at the second party and drunkenly holding forth

about the evening. "You don't need any foreplay with a dead girl," he says. He is laughing uncontrollably, as are several other boys in the room. "She's deader than O.J.'s wife. She's deader than Caylee Anthony," he continues. "They raped her harder than that cop raped Marcellus Wallace in 'Pulp Fiction.' . . . She is so raped right now." Nodianos keeps on riffing, and his audience keeps on laughing, for more than twelve minutes.

Jane Hanlin, the Jefferson County prosecutor, told me that the video was a crucial starting point. "We have the Nodianos video, and we can at least tell who is aware that something has happened," she said. "So, O.K., let's look at their Twitter accounts, let's see if we can piece together who they are talking to. And that gives us the road map of who to begin interviewing." The police called in witnesses, and got warrants to seize cell phones from several of the boys involved. On Mays's phone they found a photograph of the victim—naked and apparently passed out, with what looked like semen on her chest—which he had taken and forwarded to friends. Mark Cole and Anthony Craig had also taken videos and pictures of her throughout the night, which is a crime in Ohio; any naked image of an underage person—even one taken by that underage person—constitutes child pornography. As the police talked to witnesses, they developed a theory: Mays and Richmond had assaulted the girl, while their friends looked on and recorded the act.

"Does your waitress have any identifying marks or tattoos?"



The police sensed that there was more evidence to be had, but it was ephemeral. Many of the teens who tweeted and took pictures that night deleted their digital records as anxiety began to set in. Mays texted Anthony Craig, "You didn't take pics or vids, did you?" He also texted Evan Westlake, the boy who had shot the video of Nodianos's rant and posted it online. "Delete that off YouTube," he wrote. "Seriously you have to delete it."

Some of the material was recovered by forensics agents, and some was gone for good: the latest iPhones, unlike earlier cell phones, can permanently erase videos and texts. But digital information is difficult to contain. Clues filtered out—first to the town, and then to the world—and people began trying to fill in the gaps, trying to make sense of the story. McCafferty told me, "My wife kept saying, 'Billy, the rape kit's gonna be coming

down today!' I'm going, 'Where are you hearing this shit, Jody?' 'That's what they're saying on Twitter.'" In fact, no rape kit was ever performed. Days after the incident, the girl's mother took her to the emergency room, where it was determined that it was too late for the testing to be worthwhile.

The police had implicated Mark Cole and Evan Westlake, both football players, in the crime, but the coach did not suspend them until the eighth game of a ten-game season. As Goddard learned more, she became convinced that there was a cover-up to protect the team. "This was a conspiracy from Day and Second One," she told me. At the center of it, she believed, was Jane Hanlin, the prosecutor. The three most prominent witnesses —Westlake, Cole, and Anthony Craig—were all granted immunity in exchange for their testimony. Goddard discovered that Hanlin's son was good friends with the three boys, and it was clear to her that Hanlin had orchestrated this arrangement to protect them. Although Hanlin ultimately turned the case over to the Ohio attorney general's office, Goddard was outraged by how long it took. "She was on the case for sixteen days!" Goddard said. "Get your ass off the case as soon as it hits your desk. Period."

McCafferty said that the idea of a cover-up was ludicrous, and that it made no difference that the suspects were Big Red football players: "I don't care if they were chess students!" He pointed out that the police had obtained the digital evidence weeks before Goddard, but, as in any open case, they kept the information confidential. "She started this *after* we arrested those kids," McCafferty said. "She didn't think enough media attention was being paid to this case. I don't know what Ms. Goddard thought we should come out and say—that's not how it works."

McCafferty knew Goddard when she lived in Steubenville; she dated his partner. "And I *thought* I was friends with her," he said. But he felt harassed by her, and beset by bloggers and social media in general. Earlier this year, his e-mail was hacked, and someone posted online a fifteen-year-old photograph of him in Jamaica, holding a drink and wearing nothing but a G-string with a bow tie on the front. "They want to hang me and my department," he said. Asked who "they" were, he replied, "Twitter."

Soon after Goddard started blogging about Steubenville, she noticed that she had a growing number of new Twitter followers, who appeared in their profile pictures wearing an eerie white Guy Fawkes mask—the emblem of the hacking collective Anonymous. Fascinated by their presence, Goddard wondered, "Am I their social-media darling?" Anonymous was a potent ally. Since it came to prominence, in 2008, for pursuing the Church of Scientology, it has staged cyber attacks on MasterCard and Sony, and on the governments of the United States, Nigeria, and Turkey. It is an amorphous and mutable collective. According to a video statement recorded by an Anon, as affiliates refer to themselves, "There is no control, no leadership, only influence." Its membership

extends from the libertarian right to the far left, united by the belief that many institutions are inherently corrupt, or at least incompetent, and that the Internet provides the means to strike back from behind a digital cloak.

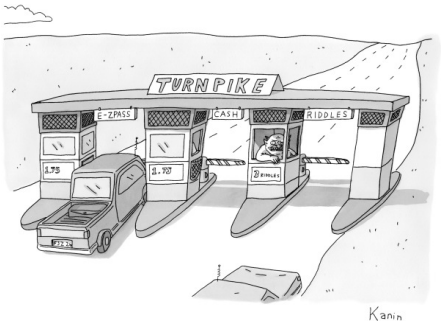
On January 2, 2013, after hacking into several students' e-mail accounts, Anonymous posted the Nodianos video on YouTube again, and it has since been viewed more than two million times. The following day, Anons hacked the Big Red Web site and replaced the usual content—images of football players and cheerleaders, with the words "tradition" and "honor" rotating across the screen—with a video of their own. In it, a person wearing a grinning Fawkes mask and a hooded sweatshirt sits in semi-darkness. "Greetings, citizens of the world," he says, in a computer-synthesized voice. "The town of Steubenville has been good at keeping this quiet and their star football team protected." He warns that a file is being compiled with personal information on every member of the football team—phone numbers, addresses, Social Security numbers, the names of relatives—and will be released unless all the accused parties come forward by New Year's Day and apologize. The "hive" of Anonymous "will not sit idly by and watch a group of young men who turn to rape as a game or sport get the pass." Then the picture of Richmond and Mays carrying the girl from West Virginia comes on the screen, and the voice says, "This is a call to arms."

One columnist called the photograph "rape culture's Abu Ghraib moment." In the *Times*, Nicholas Kristof compared the case to one in India, in which a young student was gang-raped on a bus, so brutally that she died soon afterward; the column was titled "Is Delhi So Different from Steubenville?" The former porn star Traci Lords, who grew up in Steubenville and was raped there when she was ten, wrote a song about the crime, called "Stupidville," and released a video to go with it. "They treated her like she was an animal," she told Piers Morgan, seething. "They're carrying her around like she's a pig; they urinated on her. . . . I know that they haven't been proven guilty as of yet, but, I mean —it's our sisters, it's our daughters, it's our mothers."

Nodianos's voice-mail, e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter accounts were hacked, as were his parents' and grandfather's voice-mail accounts. He began to receive death threats, and the state chapter of the National Organization for Women called for his arrest. An online anti-sexism group called UltraViolet circulated a petition to the Ohio attorney general's office demanding additional arrests in the "infamous gang rape," during which the victim was "carried, unconscious, to different parties and raped at multiple locations throughout the night."

One afternoon, I met Jane Hanlin in her office, around the corner from the police station, where she sat at her desk underneath a poster of Snoopy standing with an American flag. She told me that she had watched with increasing frustration as the story spun out of control. "Here comes Goddard, here come the bloggers, and we're sitting here watching this, knowing that we can't respond," she said, because the case was still open.

But by the norms of social media there is little difference between confidentiality and obfuscation; if something isn't broadcast, it must be furtive. "If you do anything to say, 'Wait until we get to the truth,' you are 'pro-rape'—whatever that means," Hanlin said. "You are part of a conspiracy, a cover-up."



When the victim's parents first went to the police, they were not sure they would press charges. The family "just wanted to get through it and get done," their attorney, Bob Fitzsimmons, told me. The victim wasn't certain that a crime had been committed; at one point, she'd texted Mays to assure him that "we know you didn't rape me." More than anything, she wanted the night to go away. "Honestly, I was praying that everything I heard wasn't true, and I didn't want to get myself in a bunch of drama because I knew everyone would just try and blame me," she said.

"We said it was important that this go forward," Hanlin told me. "If we'd stood down, the evidence would have disappeared." The girl's family met with a detective and agreed to coöperate, and within ten days the police began making arrests. Contrary to Goddard's account, it did not take Hanlin sixteen days to recuse herself. On August 21st, a week after the victim's parents went to the police, Hanlin contacted the attorney general's office to ask for a special prosecutor, recommending that the boys be charged as adults.

Anyway, Hanlin argued, "It is not a law that every time I know somebody involved in a case I have to step aside. We're a very small community. I rarely if ever prosecute a case where I don't know the defendant, the witnesses, the law-enforcement officers." She felt that her knowledge of the town was an asset in the early part of the investigation. "The Nodianos kid actually graduated with my daughter—I've known him since he was five years old. So when the video comes up I go, 'Michael Nodianos,'" she said, tapping her computer screen. "I can hear the voice laughing in the background. I say, 'Evan Westlake.' " She was able to look at all the tweets and identify their authors because, she said, "I stalk my kids on Twitter, I stalk their friends on Twitter, I stalk them on Facebook. I think that's one major obligation as a parent of teen-agers." (Hanlin also uses Twitter to pursue adult criminals, she said: "You cannot believe the number of targets in the drug world who will tweet pictures of themselves smoking marijuana, purchasing marijuana, stacking up bills next to marijuana.") It was not Hanlin but the attorney general, Mike

DeWine, who requested immunity for Craig, Cole, and Westlake. DeWine told me that the boys who recorded the assault had done something "horrible, horrible, horrible. But you make a call. Our main job is to get the two guys who committed rape, who are the most culpable."

Hanlin said that parents were comfortable bringing their teens to the police station for questioning, because everyone in their town knows everyone else: "There's a sense of trust there." It may also have helped that the teens seemed largely unaware that they'd been involved in a crime. "They don't think that what they've seen is a rape in the classic sense. And if you were to interview a thousand teen-agers before this case started and said, 'Is it illegal to take a video of another teen-ager naked?,' I would be astonished if you could find even one who said yes."

Hanlin told me that she had recused herself from the case in order to shield her family. "You have to remember, my son was a senior at that high school," she said. "His mother would be the person who prosecuted his teammates, who prosecuted his friends, who advised law-enforcement officers to interrogate people. Be my son then, walking down the hallway of that school." Since the story broke, though, Hanlin and her family have received dozens of threats, and during the trial they were concerned enough to leave town. "The letters they got, the texts and e-mails, how they want to kill her and rape her children—it was so disgusting," the county sheriff, Fred Abdalla, told me. "She brought the most serious charges: they were charged as adults! What more can you ask of her?"

Jonathan Zittrain, a professor of law and computer science at Harvard, says that people seeking justice online fall into distinct groups. There are those "who think they're the Bloodhound Gang and want to solve the case," like the thousands on Reddit piecing together clues about the Boston Marathon bombings. And there are those who believe that "people aren't taking things seriously, either because of corruption or because in the eyes of the vigilante they have a form of bias—'They don't care, because of their values, and we're going to shame them into doing something about it.'"

The Internet is uniquely qualified as a venue for public shaming; it is a town square big enough to put all the world's sinners in the stocks. Activists have gathered online to condemn advocates for abortion rights (and against them) in the United States, a cyber bully in British Columbia, a woman in South Korea who failed to curb her dog. In China, an army of vigilantes known as the "human flesh search engine" exposes corrupt politicians and cheating spouses. "By the time people have torches and pitchforks, the system has gone wrong," Zittrain says. "But you do want a justice system that generates socially relevant outcomes. The reason we involve juries is that we want the community to be a piece of what's going on."

By the logic of vigilantism, the need for justice supersedes the rules of a creaky bureaucracy. But that assumes that the accusations are correct. After the Boston Marathon bombing, commenters on Reddit speculated that one of the culprits was Sunil Tripathi, a twenty-two-year-old Brown University student who had disappeared a month before. People posted accusations on a Facebook page that Tripathi's family members had set up to aid their search for him, and dozens of reporters called their cell phones and staked out their home in Pennsylvania. "It was absolutely horrible," his mother said. Investigators quickly cleared Tripathi of any involvement in the bombings. His body was found in a river in Providence, where it had evidently been for some time.

On January 5th, thirteen hundred people from across the country attended a rally, promoted on Twitter as #OccupySteubenville. They gathered on the snowy steps of the Jefferson County Courthouse, many wearing Guy Fawkes masks, holding up signs with messages like "Rape Is Not a Sport!" and chanting, "Charge them all!" Survivors of sexual assault spoke about what they had endured. "My name is Alicia, I'm a citizen of Steubenville here, I was raped in 2000, reported it to the police"—but the police, she said, did not follow up on her charge. The crowd booed. Goddard had referred to Steubenville as "Rapeville," and, as woman after woman recounted her experience, the name began to feel appropriate. "Hi, my name is Kaylee, and at the age of fourteen I was raped by a tall football player that I had a crush on," a young woman said, and started to cry into the microphone. "I thought he was so nice, and the greatest thing in the world. I decided not to press charges, because it took place at my friend's house, and I didn't want my friends to get in trouble." She struggled to get out the end of her sentence: "Those friends didn't believe me." The crowd shouted, "We believe you!"

By February, Goddard's Web site was getting fifty thousand hits a day. She was flown to Manhattan to film an episode of "20/20" about the case, and she appeared on the "Dr. Phil" show and as a guest on several news programs, which identified her as "the blogger who broke the story." She was invited to take part in a campaign called Unite Against Rape, for which prominent women—Margaret Cho, Sandra Fluke, Roseanne Barr—were photographed for public-service announcements. "I have a new hero," a woman named Vickie-Lee Wall posted under the photo of Goddard. "If more people were as moral, dedicated to what's right, the world would be a better place."

"I found this stuck in the sand right next to some sleeping people."

For many of Goddard's new admirers, she was a crusader for victims and a champion of free speech. She fought off a lawsuit from the family of Cody Saltsman, the victim's former boyfriend, who sued after commenters on her blog posted accusations against him. (One theory had Saltsman masterminding the entire night to punish her for cheating on him.) Goddard refused to reveal her commenters' identities, and, after the A.C.L.U. of Ohio offered to take on the case, it was dismissed. On Prinniefied, Goddard wrote that she had protected people who were afraid to express their ideas "because in their town *you aren't supposed to talk about it*."

When I met Goddard, a few weeks before Richmond and Mays went on trial, she told me that she had decided to write a book about the case, and that her new agent called her "the Erin Brockovich of Steubenville." But "I don't see myself the way other people see me," she said. "My roommate is always telling me, 'People look up to you—they think you're a very strong person and a smart person.' With this case? I don't think I've really grasped how huge it is. Internationally, and opening that dialogue that we do have rape culture and violence against women."

But Goddard's manner has sometimes been discordant with her newfound status as a voice for women. She frequently refers to Jane Hanlin—a trim, blond, conventionally pretty woman—as "Gravy Legs," because "gravy spreads easily," she explained, with a giggle. "My roommate says, 'You are a catalyst for change,'" Goddard told me. "She's right. I cause change. Look at Steubenville right now."

As the trial approached, a truck sponsored by activists began driving around town with a message painted on its side: "The World Is Watching Steubenville." In the high-school parking lot and at the mall, the mood was edgy. Many people felt ambushed: by the media, the hordes of masked Anons, protesters, and one another. Fred Abdalla, the sheriff, told me that he was frequently drawn into conflicts generated by social media: "We get calls from around the county. 'You got to come over. I want to show you what this bitch said about me.' Yeah—grownups!"

One afternoon, Connie Lulla sat in her yellow kitchen and talked about the effect the case was having on the community. Lulla was Goddard's best friend and her roommate when she lived in Steubenville; she is married to Ed Lulla, the officer Goddard first called about the case. "I have never seen anything like this in my life," she said. "And I'm almost forty! I sat in Bob Evans the other day, and people were talking about Jane Hanlin, like, 'She's a liar.' There's just tension walking in a store. And if I disagree with anybody I'm attacked!" Asked by whom, Lulla said, "On social media."

Goddard was the maid of honor at Lulla's wedding, but now the two were sniping at each other on Twitter, part of a larger battle that Goddard is fighting against people who feel she has slandered Steubenville. A person who tweets under @Judicious1_ posted, "I hate lying, evil, child-stalking women with tattoos on their breast. Sorry Prinnie, but

you're not worthy." Even Lulla's mother joined the fight. In January, she tweeted, "Prinnie is a loser and has no life," and went on to say that she hoped Goddard and all her friends "get AIDS and die a slow death." In person, Lulla seemed unhappy about her estrangement from her old friend. But on Twitter she took a different tone. "Authorities didn't cover up anything!" she tweeted. "Dumb asses . . . suck it!"

In the months since the rape case became a national story, it has been difficult to distinguish between virtual and physical reality in Steubenville. In January, every school in the district was put on lockdown for ninety minutes after a shooting threat was made on social media. One mother went on the "Dr. Phil" show and complained, crying, that children were "in a corner . . . puking, peeing their pants" because they were so afraid. "I am so tired of everybody coming down on our town!" she said. Joe Biasi, an American-studies teacher at the high school, told me, "It's always been, 'We're proud of Steubenville, proud of Big Red, proud of our traditions and the school system.' Now it's been totally flipped." For his students, he said, "That's the huge cost of it. Now they've got this tag on them for something very, very negative that they had nothing to do with."

"Rape culture" is not an empty term or an imaginary phenomenon. According to a survey published by the Centers for Disease Control in 2011, one in five American women have been raped or experienced attempted rape. In May, the officer in charge of preventing sexual assault in the U.S. Air Force was arrested for groping a woman in a parking lot. Two days later, the Pentagon released a poll of a hundred and eight thousand active-duty service members showing that twenty-six thousand had been sexually assaulted. Worldwide, women between fifteen and forty-four are more likely to be injured or die from male violence than from traffic accidents, cancer, malaria, and the effects of war combined. This sustained brutality would be impossible without a culture that enables it: a value system in which women are currency, and sex is something that men get—or take—from them.

In April, a teen-age girl in Halifax, Nova Scotia, hanged herself; her mother said that four boys had raped her and then disseminated a photograph of the assault throughout their high school. In late February, two eighteen-year-old football players in Torrington, Connecticut, were arrested for raping two thirteen-year-old girls at the home of one of the boys. Their classmates responded on Twitter. "Young girls acting like whores there's no punishment," one wrote. "Young men acting like boys is a sentence." These situations, in which teen-agers were assaulted, and then further victimized online, have inevitably been compared to Steubenville—a town that has become synonymous with gang rape.

In trying to determine what happened in Steubenville, the police and the public began with the same information, gathered from the same online sources: ugly tweets, the Instagram photograph, and a deeply disturbing video. But while the police commandeered phones, interviewed witnesses, and collected physical evidence from the crime scene, readers online relied on collaborative deduction. The story they produced

felt archetypally right. The "hacktivists" of Anonymous were modern-day Peter Parkers—computer nerds who put on a costume and were transformed into superhero vigilantes. The girl from West Virginia stood in for every one of the world's female victims: nameless, faceless, stripped of identity or agency. And there was a satisfying villain. Teenage boys who play football in Steubenville—among many other places—*are* aggrandized and often *do* end up with a sense of thuggish entitlement.

In versions of the story that spread online, the girl was lured to the party and then drugged. While she was delirious, she was transported in the trunk of a car, and then a gang of football players raped her over and over again and urinated on her body while her peers watched, transfixed. The town, desperate to protect its young princes, contrived to cover up the crime. If not for Goddard's intercession, the police would have happily let everyone go. None of that is true.

"I lost the hand to a shark, the leg to a barracuda, and the gallbladder to Dr. Steven Erlich."

"What happened to the girl is atrocious," Jane Hanlin told me. "But what they're putting out there about her is worse—and false." Nobody urinated on the victim. She was not "brutally gang-raped." At the trial in March, Mays and Richmond were accused of putting their fingers in her vagina while she was too intoxicated to give consent. There is no evidence to support the claim that the entire football team was present when the assault occurred, or that "dozens of teens witnessed the events," as a recent *Glamour* article had it. "The narrative that goes through these stories is: there are dozens of onlookers; she's taken from party to party; she's raped at multiple locations," Hanlin said. "Understandably, people are outraged when they read that, because it makes it look as though there is a whole group of kids here who watched and heckled and laughed and participated. That's not true: there are five that behaved very badly. But five is less than eighty." She added, "There is a better explanation than that everybody here is evil all the time: intoxicated teen-agers are the world's worst thinkers."

Among people who followed the case, Richmond was widely regarded as the more sympathetic defendant. Goddard told me, "Trent Mays, he can rot in hell. But Ma'lik?" She wasn't so sure. "I think Ma'lik has a good chance of being found not guilty."

When the state crime lab analyzed the Steelers blanket that the girl had shared with Mays, it found his semen on it, but no trace of Richmond's DNA. No video evidence of his involvement was recovered by forensics, and, unlike his teammates, Richmond never posted disparaging tweets or photographs of the girl. Goddard suspected that the other boys might be conspiring to make him seem guilty.

Richmond's lawyer, Walter Madison—a brash former football player from Youngstown—gave a series of television interviews in which he portrayed Richmond as the ultimate casualty of the case, often beginning by asking, "What is a victim?" (Before the trial, he filed a motion to have the girl be referred to as "the accuser" instead of "the victim.") The story that Madison told about his client followed a familiar, emotionally potent narrative: an African-American football prodigy endures a difficult childhood and is rescued by a white family. When Richmond was eight years old, his father, an ex-convict from Chicago, was found guilty of attempted murder and went to jail for five years. "Like any kid, he needed his parents, and he began acting out," Madison told me. "Football was his catharsis." His coach on the Pee Wee team recognized him as special. "He was pretty gifted at that time—much more than any other child," the coach, Greg Agresta, said on ABC. Agresta, who is a senior vice-president at a local bank, told himself, "This is a special kid: I'm going to do what I can to help him out."

Richmond moved in with the Agrestas, leaving behind his brothers and sisters, and he stayed for two years, until his mother's health problems drew him home. But he remained close to his adoptive family. For nine months before his trial, he was under house arrest, and he spent the time at the Agrestas'. "20/20" characterized the situation as "The Blind Side" meets "Friday Night Lights" meets "The Accused."

For Madison, for the Agrestas, and for Richmond's father, Nathaniel, it seemed inconceivable that Ma'lik—the star athlete, the diligent student, the embodiment of redemption—was to blame. One evening, I had dinner with Nathaniel at an Italian restaurant in Steubenville, where he was the only African-American in the crowded dining room. "Ma'lik said, 'Dad, I never touched her,' " he told me. According to his theory, the victim's father found out that one of the teen-agers present that night was black and then told his daughter, " 'Hey, you're taking your ass down to the police station.' " He shook his head. "They got a sacrificial lamb."

A waitress came over and took Richmond's order. "I hope I'm not speaking out of turn," she said, "but aren't you that boy's daddy? That boy Ma'lik?"

"I could be," Richmond replied. "Why?"

"I feel really bad for him," she said.

"Maybe you want to donate to the Ma'lik Richmond Foundation," he replied. "The Ma'lik Richmond College Fund."

“I saw him on TV,” she said. “I felt real bad.”

“He’ll be all right,” Richmond told her. “Thanks for your concern, though.”

After she left, I asked Richmond if he was in a lot of pain. “I’m just stressed,” he said. “I disregard the pain. I’m used to pain.” He went to jail for the first time when he was eighteen, for manslaughter, and I asked him what that was like. “What was it like? It was like anything you can imagine! You got your bad days and your good days: one day you can lose your life, the next you can have a party.”

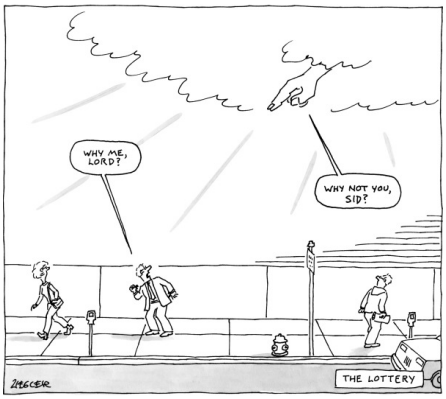
I asked if he had been guilty of the crime. “I don’t really know,” he said. “I guess I was.”

The judge who came from Cincinnati to hear the case was more lenient than Jane Hanlin; he determined that Richmond and Mays would be tried as juveniles. On March 13th, the day the trial began, a crowd of protesters gathered outside a blocky modern building next to the river, which houses the juvenile court, along with a few government offices. Across the highway, people put up hand-lettered signs that read, “The World Is Watching” and “Do You Know What Your Child Texts?” In Ohio, juvenile trials do not use juries, so there was no concern that the outrage about the case would influence jurors. But its effects were felt. According to a CNN report streamed from outside the courthouse, a few witnesses admitted that the stories online and in the press had influenced their memory of what happened.

Despite all the talk of conspiracy, the evidence presented at trial suggested a free-for-all: a scrum of young men all trying to blame each other. The day after the parties, it came out, Anthony Craig had texted the girl, “I seriously felt so fucking bad for you and I couldn’t do shit about it. I’m so sorry.” He neglected to mention that he had taken photographs of her while she was naked and incapacitated. Evan Westlake testified that he was “stunned at what I saw” in Mark Cole’s basement, and that he “just wanted to get out of there.” Yet, after he left, he went back to the second party and made the video of Nodianos. In the background, you can hear him encouraging Nodianos—“How do you feel on a dead girl?”—and laughing.

Neither Mays nor Richmond took the stand, but Mays’s voice was heard through his text messages, which depicted a manipulative boy who felt entitled to gratification—a spokesman for rape culture. “She was a deady, and I needed sexual attention,” he texted a friend two days after the party. Meanwhile, he reassured the distraught girl, “Nothing happened . . . seriously you know I like you a lot.” With friends, Mays made her distress seem like an inconvenience. “She’s actin like I killed her or something,” he texted. But, when he heard that her parents knew about the situation, he got her father’s phone number. “Sir, this is Trent Mays,” he texted him. “This is all a misunderstanding. I just took care of your daughter when she was drunk and made sure she was safe.”

Mays was inconsistent in his boasts about what he had done. When one boy texted, "Did you fuck her?," Mays said that he had. ("Yeah boy!" the friend replied.) But when another friend asked the same question, Mays replied, "No lol. She could barely move." To a third, he wrote, "I'm pissed all I got was a handjob. I shoulda raped her since everyone thinks I did."



The testimony left little doubt that Mays had been physical with the girl. Cole said that as they rode in the car together "Trent had started fingering her in the back seat, and that's when I took my phone out and I started recording." Instead, the central question was whether she was too impaired to be capable of consent. Cole said that, at his house, "she was still able to tell us that she had to throw up, so she wasn't passed out," but he allowed that "she wasn't, like, herself." Later, he saw Mays "knelt over top of her, trying to shove it in her mouth." In Cole's description, the girl seemed clearly debilitated. Mays, he said, was "moving her head around, I guess to try and get it to happen." The prosecutor asked Cole if he was shocked. "I was drunk at the time, too," he said. "It didn't seem that bad."

The case against Richmond was less clear: without physical or digital evidence, the prosecution hinged on the testimony of his peers. Cole said that while Mays was assaulting the girl he saw Richmond with his hand "around her shorts area, but I couldn't see what he was doing." Craig could be sure only that he saw him "on his stomach behind her." Evan Westlake, however, gave a very detailed account. Though he passed through the room for "less than a minute, I'd say thirty seconds," he testified that he clearly saw Richmond "using his fingers to penetrate her vagina . . . halfway to the knuckle." He said that he "didn't know if she was participating or not."

Madison pursued a peculiar defense strategy: trying to establish that the victim was a dissolute, habitual drinker—"a party girl," he said—and also that she was sober enough to give consent. At one point, he told the court, "If she chooses to have sex with more than one person, objectionable as the behavior may be, she may do that." But if "her parents find out and they're embarrassed and they go and make this complaint, that doesn't make

it rape." When we talked outside of court, Madison, who said he considered himself "very much a feminist," put it more bluntly: "She finds out about the tweets, she's humiliated. She's got two choices at this point: 'Dad, I'm a slut.' Or, 'I'm raped.'" He didn't exactly tell me that Richmond was innocent, but he insisted that there was no "solid evidence that a crime occurred." The prosecution, he suggested, played on irrational emotions by arguing that the victim was clearly unconscious in the photo. "How the hell you know if somebody's unconscious in a photo?" He paused and laughed. "The picture's bad, though, don't get me wrong—that's a bad picture."

The victim's lawyer, Bob Fitzsimmons, another former football player, angrily defended the case against Richmond. "There's a thing called circumstantial evidence," he snapped. "The mere fact that he's laying next to an unconscious body that's not moving—what the hell's he doing? Let's be real about it. His buddy's hitting his dick against her ass? And this guy's lying next to her? Come on, have some common sense!" Fitzsimmons was starting to yell. "And you don't think he's raping her?" Like the bloggers and pundits, Fitzsimmons imagined a scenario that was probably *like* the one that the girl endured but wasn't it specifically: "She's got four goddam criminals trying to piss on her—she's not taking notes!"

During the trial, each of the teens was asked if he would consent to being videotaped or photographed by the press, and each said no. But by the end the victim's identity was widely known. In coverage of the trial, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC all inadvertently broadcast her name. A petition was circulated online to demand an apology, but it was too late: Anonymous had posted the transcript of Richmond and Mays's probable-cause hearing, and it, too, had neglected to redact her name.

Ma'lik Richmond and Trent Mays were adjudicated delinquent—the equivalent of a guilty verdict—on March 17th. Richmond was sentenced to a year in juvenile detention; Mays, convicted of both rape and disseminating child pornography, got two years and was ordered to register as a sex offender for twenty years. In August, the court will determine if Richmond must do the same.

When Richmond was convicted, Madison told me, "he was so afraid he melted in my arms like my seven- and five-year-olds." Madison wiped tears from his eyes as he recounted the experience. "He hugged me and cried on my chest, like, Don't ever let me go. He said, 'Nobody's going to want me now. My life is over.'"

When I met Richmond, he was living on a locked floor above the Jefferson County Courthouse, in Steubenville, awaiting transfer to a state facility. Like all the other young prisoners, he was dressed in a green shirt and pants that looked like hospital scrubs. He has a boy's face, with a fine mustache just starting to come in, set on the hulking body of a grown man.

Contrary to what his father told me, Richmond said that he had been intimate with the girl from West Virginia. "We were just touching each other and kissing," when they first got to Mark Cole's house, he said. "We were just rubbing on each other. I didn't . . . enter her." Asked if he had violated a code by fooling around with someone his friend had been involved with, he shook his head. "It doesn't work like that: community property."

I asked Richmond why his friends had testified against him. "They're not my friends," he shot back. "They were Trent's friends, and I was friends with Trent. I thought he was cool. I didn't know he was one of them guys that'd be playing girls like that." Their accounts of his behavior were untrue, he said. "That's a lie. All of it." This would mean that he was about to go to jail for nothing, but Richmond seemed calm. "It's fine," he said. "Can't do much about it. I don't want to hold a grudge."

The kids were all drunk that night, "just wilding out," Richmond said. But he didn't believe that the girl was unconscious. "She's remembering the stuff she wants to remember. That's how I see it." In his recollection, he was sitting in Cole's kitchen, "eating his mom's pizza," and when he went down to the basement he saw Mays standing at the head of the couch, "over on top of her, playing with himself." I asked if he'd felt unsettled when he saw his friend masturbating on a passed-out girl. "No, I was just, like, 'What are you doing?' And he just smiled at me. I just said, 'I'm going to sleep, put your clothes back on.' I wasn't really thinking about, Oh, this is rape. I was just thinking, He talked to her, so I don't really care what they do." Richmond meant that Mays's relationship with the girl, conducted through their cell phones, somehow made what was happening acceptable. Looking at me incredulously, he explained it as if to a clueless parent: "They were *texting*."

At the sentencing hearing, Richmond crossed the courtroom to speak to the victim's family. "I would like to apologize to you people," he said. "I had no intentions to do anything like that." He was sobbing so violently that a court officer patted him on the back and encouraged him to finish his statement. The officer told me that he later got threatening phone calls and e-mails, attacking him for showing compassion to a rapist. "Basically what I said was, 'You got to take a deep breath, and you got to try and get through this, Ma'lik, because what you have to say to these people is going to mean a lot to them.'"

After the sentencing, CNN's Poppy Harlow said on air that it was "incredibly difficult, even for an outsider like me, to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their life fell apart." Within forty-eight hours, more than two hundred thousand people had signed a petition on Change.org demanding that CNN apologize for its "disgusting coverage of the Steubenville Rapists."

For many people involved in the trial, the tension and the enmity continued. A few weeks later, two girls in Steubenville were convicted of using social media to threaten the victim with assault. Michael Nodianos had started his freshman year at Ohio State University when the video of him was restored to YouTube. After his course schedule was posted online, and a Facebook page called "OSU Expel Michael Nodianos 'Rape Crew' member" received three thousand "like"s, he dropped out of school. Goddard told me, "At the end of the day, nobody's a winner. Their lives have been ruined across the board, and it started from the very moment those kids made that decision—they became those kids from that school in that town. They can't ever change that."

Hanlin was disgusted with the teens who abused the girl from West Virginia, but she also felt that the bloggers had exploited the victim they were purportedly rescuing. She said that Goddard had done damage "particularly from a feminist point of view, because, but for her, that young girl would not have endured nearly the exposure that happened throughout the country. What the bloggers did was make sure that five hundred million people saw those pictures of her. I wouldn't want that picture to be seen by one person." Because the girl's name was leaked, her identity on the Internet is linked to the worst experience of her life. The way information moves online is unpredictable, though. If a college-admissions officer or a potential employer Googled her, the search window might suggest the related terms "Twitter" and "soccer," or it might suggest "drunk" and "victim." Much of the time, a search for images turns up the photograph of Mays and Richmond carrying the girl, her hair dragging beneath her on the ground.

ot long after the verdict, Goddard moved into a ramshackle house with three dogs in the Mojave Desert, where I went to visit her a couple of months ago. Several miles from her home, I drove into an area where there was no cell-phone service, and my G.P.S. gave out: I found myself in the old world, the material world, driving from house to house, knocking on doors to ask for directions. At one trailer, a German shepherd barked at me from behind a cyclone fence until his owner, an old man with long fingernails and a white beard down to his collarbone, came out and shrugged at my predicament.

Two hours later, I found Goddard's house, a large, two-story rental missing bits of the ceiling inside. "It's awesome," she said, drinking a can of beer on the balcony. "I've got shit tons of jackrabbits, and they will get about five feet away from me, 'cause I'm like the animal whisperer." She had also met a man she liked, a drill sergeant stationed at a nearby Marine Corps base. "Prinnie got her groove back," Goddard said, blowing cigarette smoke into the hot, dry sky. "I got a little boyfriend, and he's dark and delicious and twenty-six."

Goddard is fascinated by soldiers, cops, football players. Her brand of women's liberation is one in which individual scores are settled with habanero sauce or Internet sleuthing—and, if necessary, by demeaning another woman. But she is a heroine to many; she has plans to speak at a rape crisis center in Wisconsin, a men's-rights conference in Detroit, and an event in New York intended to fight slut-shaming. No book deal had materialized, but she was starting an Internet business, a Web site called creepyourkids. Her plan was to teach parents to do exactly what Jane Hanlin recommended: stalk their teen-agers on the Internet.

In the room where she kept her computer, she logged onto her Web site and showed me her advice for parents: "Bad people may be watching your child post personal information" and "Teens do not think of the ramifications of their actions." Under the heading "Consequences of Twitter," Goddard had posted a photograph of Anthony Weiner.

Social media had "changed the game," she said. "I've had a couple people say, Well, you can't get a fair trial because of that. Well, then, don't put your shit out there! It's like robbing the bank and going to the local coffee shop and saying, 'Hey, I just held up Chase!'" She had watched the verdict and the apologies, and she felt "conflicted" about Ma'lik Richmond. But she felt no remorse about her role in the case. "Don't yell at me—be mad at those kids! Be mad at the parents who didn't tell their boy children that you should not have sex with an impaired girl. Tell your kids, 'When shit's going down, don't stand there and take pictures.' I just am, like, haters keep hating."

In fact, she told me, she was still on the case. “I don’t believe that they were the only ones that committed the rape,” she said. She was suspicious of one boy in particular who had been granted immunity. “I would love to get his DNA,” she said. “I’m already working on it. Wouldn’t that be a stunner?” ♦

Ariel Levy joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2008. She won a 2014 National Magazine Award for essays and criticism, and guest-edited “The Best American Essays 2015,” which came out in October.