

May election

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COURTS YESTERDAY



\$32M court win brings 'pinch of healing' to victim in 2012 Hebron High rape case



Jennifer Emily, Writer

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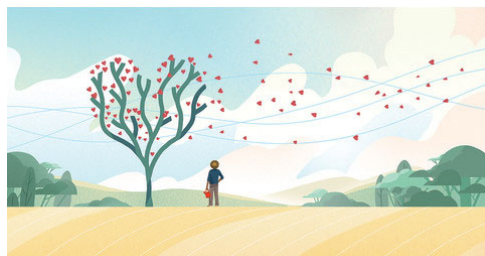
For one night, the nightmares faded and Isabella Fletcher slept peacefully.

That was in February after a civil jury awarded her \$32 million and determined that two high school football players assaulted her in the wet grass outside a party in Carrollton when they were all freshmen.

She doesn't expect her former Hebron High classmates — now 21, like her — will ever have the funds to pay. But she told *The Dallas Morning News* that the support of those 12 Denton County jurors could jump-start the healing she's needed since that Sept. 28, 2012, party and the relentless bullying that followed.

“It wasn’t the be-all fix-all at all. But it was a pinch of healing,” the former cheerleader said, sitting at a conference table in her attorney’s Dallas office. “I have this recipe for worth that I’m trying to cook up for myself; that was a pinch that made it a little better.”

What are the other ingredients? She isn’t sure yet.



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CRIME

'My life is not worthless': Dallas domestic violence survivor after jury awards her \$40M

The News does not typically name victims of sexual abuse. But Fletcher wanted her name published. She tearfully told her story because she wants women who’ve been raped to know they aren’t alone. She wants to reclaim her story. She wants to stand up for herself.

The News is not identifying the football players Fletcher said raped her because they have not been charged with a crime and they were juveniles at the time.

A Denton County grand jury previously declined to indict the men. But Fletcher’s attorney, Charla Aldous, said she sent the man’s testimony to the district attorney’s office, encouraging prosecutors to take another look.



Attorney Charla Aldous (left) represented Isabella Fletcher, who just won a \$32 million verdict against former North Texas high school football players who she said raped her when she was 14. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

Denton County First Assistant District Attorney Jamie Beck said prosecutors aren't ready to make a decision.

"I think we are looking at it, but we are a long way away from any decisions," she said.

If prosecutors pursue charges, the men would be tried as juveniles because of their age at the time — unless a judge ordered them to stand trial as adults.

One of the men could not be reached for comment. He did not show up for the trial and doesn't have an attorney. The other released a written statement.

In it, he reiterated his testimony from the trial and in a deposition: that Fletcher

willingly lost her virginity that night when she had sex with both boys at the same time. His attorney, Carrie Garcia Sanders, said he is considering appealing the verdict.



NEWS

SMU student turns rape into message of survival

"We maintain that mutual consent was given during the events of that evening. Plaintiff did not have any eye witnesses saying that she was too drunk to consent before the encounter occurred, medical record, toxicology report, or any other evidence," the statement said. "The verdict was based on speculation and sympathy, which is improper. We are considering our options, including an appeal."

The man acknowledged in his testimony that Fletcher was intoxicated, more so than he was. At the time, he said in a video-recorded deposition in December, he'd never seen anyone so drunk. He testified in his deposition that it was not OK to have sex with someone who was intoxicated and Fletcher "probably would not have" had sex with them had she been sober.

"I don't think I did anything wrong," he testified in the deposition. "I think what we did was consensual."

He also said that if he encountered someone else as drunk as Fletcher, he would have sex with her. "Because looking back on it, she was really not that drunk," he testified in a deposition.



Isabella Fletcher, now 21, just won a \$32 million verdict against former North Texas high school football players who she said raped her when she was 14. She was photographed at the Dallas office of her attorney, Charla Aldous, on, Wednesday, March 20, 2019. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

'He admitted it'

The man's testimony was damning, the presiding juror, J Ross Konkle, said in an interview.

"Well, he admitted it. It doesn't take much after he said, 'Yes, I did it. He and I both.' Plus, he said he would do it again," said Konkle, a flight attendant.

Konkle said the jurors immediately agreed the boys had sexually assaulted Fletcher.

"The only thing we had to decide was how much money," Konkle said. "We know the

money doesn't mean a thing. She'll never see a dime likely. But it's what we thought sounded fair.”

After the verdict, jurors wanted to meet Fletcher and her parents. Konkle and the other jurors clapped when the family walked in. Fletcher said she was grateful but quickly overwhelmed. She fled to the family's car while her parents, Paul and Jamie Fletcher, stayed to talk to the jury.

After Fletcher's parents returned to the car, she said, she broke down crying.

“I need counseling. I need help,” Fletcher told them. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she recalled the moment in her attorney's office.



COURTS

Amber Guyger's new look is no accident, say attorneys skilled in remaking a client

The years since the party in Carrollton have taken a toll, Fletcher said, dressed in a black Nike jacket with thumb holes. A red and white scrunchie adorned her left wrist. She's trying to quit smoking but needed a cigarette before she could talk about what she's been through.

Fletcher attempted suicide. She transferred to a home study program but said the boys who assaulted her never even missed a football practice. She's struggled to trust people, even her family.

She's sporadically sought counseling since her mom found out about what happened at the party. Another parent told her two weeks later. But Fletcher said she is ready for more intense therapy. Then, she wants to consider pursuing cosmetology or maybe college.

She wants to avoid taking on too much too soon.

The party

At the party, Fletcher said, she drank alcohol and smoked marijuana.

She thinks she may have been drugged by whatever alcohol she drank from a red cup but can't say for sure. Kids at the party talked about putting Xanax in drinks, according to depositions.

She has flashes of memory of what happened but doesn't recall everything. She remembers the grass was wet. At one point her pants were off, and then they were on. She woke up the next morning with blood in her underwear.

The football player who didn't invoke his right to remain silent testified at his deposition that he took the shorts he wore that night to school to wash them because they had Fletcher's blood on them. The bloodstain didn't wash out, and he still wore them.

After the party, Fletcher's classmates harassed her. A now-suspended Twitter account spread gossip about her. She got texts saying she should kill herself from people she knew and anonymous numbers. Classmates called her names in the hallways at school.



Attorney Charla Aldous holds a glass porcupine figurine that Isabella Fletcher brought her a couple of weeks after the jury's \$32 million verdict. When they first met, Fletcher was pretty prickly, said Aldous. The porcupine nickname became an inside joke between them. She was hard on the outside and fragile on the inside, Aldous said. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

'I didn't love myself'

Fletcher lost a lawsuit in 2017 against the Lewisville school district alleging school officials retaliated against her for filing a sexual assault complaint. Fletcher and her family accused the district of violating the federal Title IX law by favoring the football players over her and not doing enough to address the bullying and cyberbullying she endured at school.

A spokeswoman for the district said Lewisville ISD officials always had Fletcher's well-being in mind.

"It is our best hope that she finds continual support in every future endeavor," a statement from the district said. "This was a terrible situation that occurred off campus, and we believe the facts show, and two separate courts agreed, the district responded appropriately."



IMMIGRATION

ICE frees 'Dreamer' flight attendant, a Texas A&M grad, who was locked up after Mexico flight

School officials testified during that trial that they could have handled the investigation better but then took the unusual step of asking Fletcher to pay nearly \$27,000 in legal fees. A federal judge scolded the district and denied the request.

"[She] is a sexual-assault survivor who still struggles with the psychological and emotional consequences of her assault," wrote U.S. District Judge Ron Clark, who presided over that trial.

Lewisville ISD had delayed investigation of Fletcher's allegations for several months and then decided there wasn't enough evidence to determine whether she had been raped.

Fletcher said school officials never interviewed her about what happened that night or the bullying that followed. District officials, however, said they were following the wishes of Fletcher's parents.

"They made me feel like I was trash," Fletcher said. "It made me feel like I had done something wrong."

She's had trouble shaking those feelings.

Not long after they met, Aldous began to call Fletcher a porcupine. Hard on the outside and prickly. Fragile on the inside. A few weeks after the verdict, Fletcher brought Aldous a gift. A small, clear glass porcupine with a black nose and eyes.

“My parents loved me at a time I didn’t love myself. They loved me enough that it got me through it,” Fletcher said. “I feel the same way about Charla. She loved me. She saw my worth when I could not see it.”

She wants to see that worth in herself.

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