

Sunday Republican

APRIL 29, 2007

POMPERAUG \$1.50

JANE DOE

14 years of silence ends for rape victim



STEVEN VALENTI REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN
Donna Palomba of Woodbury, a 1993 rape victim of John Regan, told her story publicly for the first time using her name in an interview with 'Dateline NBC' that will air tonight. She also made a brief appearance Friday on NBC's 'Today' show.

Foundation will aid victims, police and medical professionals

BY BEN CONERY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Donna Palomba is no longer Jane Doe.

ON TV TONIGHT:

Donna Palomba will appear on "Dateline NBC" from 7 to 9 p.m. (WNBC-4, WVIT-30).

"A doctor would tell me where there's secrets, there's shame," she said last week. "I don't want to have shame about this because I did nothing wrong."

Palomba, of Woodbury, is speaking publicly for the first time about how she was raped

in 1993 and how the case unfolded over the past 14 years.

Tonight, Palomba will tell her story on "Dateline NBC," from 7 to 9 p.m. She also made a brief appearance Friday on NBC's "Today" show linking her name to the case in public for the first time. She was not paid for her appearances.

A well-known Waterbury business person who co-founded the Worx Group, a successful Prospect marketing and Web design firm, Palomba is a slender woman with expressive blue eyes and seemingly boundless energy.

Her personality has won the admiration of many in the community, as have her countless hours of work for groups from the United Way to Special Olympics and Safe Haven. She now plans to put that same dedication into a foundation she has started to help other rape victims.

Palomba said her appearance on Dateline will give her a chance to garner attention for her foundation, aptly named Jane Doe No More.

"I have so much energy around this that taking positive actions has become part of my healing process," she said. "It really is helping me to deal with everything that has happened because, I'll feel like it's not for nothing."

"It's not all bad stuff, there's really some good stuff."

Palomba said Jane Doe No More will provide education and training tools to help law enforcement, legal and medical professionals deal with rape victims. The Worx Group has donated to its services to Jane Doe No More, which will help the foundation use Internet technology to get its message out nationally.

While not a service destination, Palomba said Jane Doe No More's Web site will link to services available to rape victims. It also will have a message board for rape victims to share their stories and include messages of support.

"I really have a desire to help other victims," she said. "There's a lot of things that happened in my case that I think could have gone differently."

On Sept. 11, 1993, Palomba, who was 36 at the time, was left alone overnight with her children for the first time in her marriage. Her husband, John, was at a wedding out of state.

Palomba took her two children to a concert and out for pizza before returning to their home in Waterbury's Overlook neighborhood.

Later that night, a masked intruder woke Palomba from a deep sleep.

He bound her. Held a gun to her head. And raped her.

"I thought I was going to die," she said. "I mean literally, when you have a gun to your head you think you're going to die."

At first, Palomba felt relieved when the attack ended. She took comfort in knowing her children slept through the attack and were unharmed.

The second attack

The problems began almost immediately.

"THE SOLE REASON FOR ME COMING FORWARD IS TO GIVE HOPE TO OTHER VICTIMS."

DONNA PALOMBA,
the victim of a 1993 rape

The police who responded never collected forensic evidence or secured the crime scene. Palomba did go to the hospital for a rape examination at the urging of a female officer. She remained confident police would help her.

With her positive outlook, Palomba said she even returned to work by the end of the next week. Not that things were easy.

"Believe me, any time my husband hit the wood stairs I would jump up," she said. "Those were going to be normal things."

Within a month, Palomba said she suffered another trauma that was in some ways worse than the rape, because it came at the hands of the police.

That October, Palomba said then Police Lt. Douglas Moran threatened her with arrest, accusing her of making false statements. He told her she was lying about the rape allegation and that she could lose her husband, her children and her career.

Palomba was devastated. She said the post-traumatic stress she suffers today is exacerbated by what she calls the "second attack."

"Instead of me being allowed to heal, I had to fight for my innocence, which is absolutely outrageous," she said. "To think that trained officers could not recognize that this was what it was — criminal."

But she was not without allies in law enforcement.

Detective George Lescarde was the first to bring up criticisms of the investigation to Neil O'Leary, who also worked in the detective bureau at the time and is now super intendent of the Waterbury Police Department.

Months later, Waterbury State's Attorney John A. Connelly agreed the original investigation was handled poorly and assigned an inspector from his office, John "Pudgie" Maia and O'Leary to the case.

But by then, the leads had run cold.

Though no arrests were made, a \$190,000 judgment against the police department following a 2001 civil trial at least showed Palomba was telling the truth about the rape. The case also led the Waterbury Police Department to change the way it handles sexual assault cases.

But Palomba was still left feeling less than vindicated because she believed accounts in the Republican-American continued to cast doubt on her story.

No more

It wasn't until 2004 when a seemingly un-

related arrest brought Palomba's case back to the forefront.

That October, 47-year-old John Regan, a married, church-going father from a prominent Waterbury family, was arrested on charges he tried to force himself on a 21-year-old co-worker.

Driving home one night, O'Leary, who was then acting chief, had a revelation: The night Palomba was raped there was a stag party for Regan's cousin. John Palomba would have been there if he were home and everyone there would have known that Donna Palomba was home alone.

After he confirmed Regan was at the party, O'Leary followed up with another question: Could John Regan have raped Donna Palomba?

It seemed preposterous, especially to Palomba's husband. Regan and John Palomba had been friends since kindergarten.

"We'd been to each others weddings," Palomba said.

O'Leary followed through and convinced Regan to provide a DNA sample. It matched the DNA in Palomba's rape kit.

When O'Leary told her, Palomba said she began to shake uncontrollably. Worse, the color drained from her husband's face.

"For me, I finally knew who was behind the mask," she said. "But to watch my husband learn it was a friend, it was horrible."

Regan was charged with kidnapping because the statute of limitations had expired for sexual assault charges. After posting bonds totaling \$350,000, Regan was allowed to keep his freedom.

A year later, still awaiting trial, Regan was arrested again after he tried to drag a high school girl into his van in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. The girl was able to fight free and Regan was captured and arrested.

The location of the crime unnerved Palomba. Though she was in Paris studying at the time, Palomba's daughter was a student at Skidmore College, nearby Regan's attack. Only later did she learn that Regan was in upstate New York to fix houses owned by his uncle.

"My thought was he should never had been out on bond," Palomba said. "I mean it looked like he intended to kill her (the girl he abducted). I mean there was a tarp, a noose, a shovel," inside Regan's van.

While Regan was in jail in New York, Waterbury police added charges of stalking the 21-year-old co-worker he was previously charged with trying to assault. About the same time, another woman came forward accusing Regan of trying to sexually assault her 25 years earlier. Prosecutors did not pursue that charge.

In the end, Regan pleaded guilty in New York and Connecticut and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Palomba said national media outlets started to call people familiar with the case. Around the same time, she started laying the ground work for what would become Jane Doe No More. The group includes many of the people she got to know during her case.

Through an intermediary, she had been in contact with NBC for about a year.

Despite an offer of anonymity from Dateline, Palomba insisted on using her name.

"If our organization is to break stigmas associated with rape, I'm coming forward," she said. "Here I am telling people it doesn't diminish who you are, it's not your fault. Then why shouldn't I be named?"

Palomba said she hopes appearing on Dateline will relieve at least one of her anxieties.

"I'm going to be, I hope, relieved of this 'who knows, who doesn't know, who do I say what to,'" she said.