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The wolves of Jeff City: Sexual harassment at the Capitol



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JEFFERSON CITY — First came a hand on her back. Then on her leg. When fingers inched higher, Sarah Felts bolted.

She was a 21-year-old intern in the Missouri Capitol out for drinks with co-workers.

A few legislators showed up. Felts found herself alone with one lawmaker after the crowd thinned.

That's when he touched her, and she hurriedly conjured excuses to get away.

She had to use the restroom, get back to the office. She faked a smile.

Soon she was in her car, crying.

"It makes me feel kind of slimy that I didn't say something," she said, "and didn't speak up for myself."

Felts recalls endless comments during her internship about how she looked, how her body filled out her clothes. The perpetrators were young and old, Republican and Democrat.

Her unsettling initial brush with Missouri's Capitol culture dates to 2008. But dozens of women — current and former interns, legislative aides, lobbyists and lawmakers — told The Star lechery and harassment remain commonplace.

The Capitol poses a ceaseless onslaught of unnerving and sometimes treacherous situations.

One woman recalls being asked the color of her underwear while lobbying a lawmaker on a bill. Another talks of late-night texts from her boss asking if she would like to come to his apartment for a drink. A former intern says that when she finally got her boss to stop sending flirty text messages, he began treating her coldly and left her out of important projects.

Accounts of unending come-ons, of retaliation for sexual rejection, of false accusations that they must be sleeping with the boss, are legion.

Some women who spoke with The Star were ready to share their stories publicly. Most were not, fearing it would only damage their careers or leave them ostracized in the Capitol.

With friends and family many miles away, fundraisers and lobbyist-funded parties fill the evenings — offering no shortage of free alcohol to fuel the atmosphere.

"The culture of Jefferson City is very anything goes," said former state Sen. John Lamping, a St. Louis County Republican who left office in 2014. "We're in town three days a week, and we don't work particularly late very often. So the mentality is, 'Wow, this is so much fun."

We're doing crazier stuff than we did in college. But now we have power, prestige and money.”

Capitol culture

Every lawmaker and Capitol staff member must participate in sexual harassment training. Both House and Senate sexual harassment policies spell out a complaint process and outline corrective measures.

The House policy directs harassment complaints first to House administrators, including the chief clerk. The policy states that “all complaints will be investigated promptly, thoroughly and fairly” by House staff.

If the complaint involves an elected lawmaker, disciplinary action can be taken by an ethics committee of 10 lawmakers and chaired by the House majority leader. A lawmaker can be expelled from the House with a two-thirds vote of the full 163-member chamber.

Over the last five years, only four sexual harassment complaints have been filed with the Missouri House. House counsel David Welch said the harassment policy informs employees they also have the right to file a discrimination charge with the Missouri Human Rights Commission or the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or to consult with an attorney.

Most of those willing to share their stories with The Star said they kept quiet out of a belief that a complaint would never result in real consequences — save for the targets of the unwanted overtures.

“If a legislator harasses a staff member, the general feeling is that nothing is going to happen,” said a former female legislative assistant to a Republican state representative. “It’s not like (the legislator) can get fired. But our lives can be ruined.”

Another former Republican House staffer said she endured months of sexual harassment, from lewd comments to a torrent of unwelcome advances. When her male boss spoke up for her to the perpetrators, it sparked hurtful and untrue rumors that the two were having an affair.

“The best thing that ever happened to me,” she said, “was getting another job and leaving that building.”

The isolation of a small-city capital dominated by powerful men away from home — and the idea of what happens in Jefferson City stays there — makes the place hostile territory for women pursuing careers in state government.

A recent Harvard study found that geographic isolation of state Capitols reduces accountability. And out of 197 seats in the Missouri General Assembly, only 49 are held by women. In the House, four of the 12 leadership positions are held by women. In the Senate, three of 11 leaders are women.

“It’s a place where power and money and isolation mix together and create an atmosphere that is more like a convention at times,” said Dave Robertson, professor of political science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Kelly Schultz has a name for the first volley from a Statehouse male looking to gauge a woman’s interest in a less-than-professional relationship: “test-fire shots.”

They can be seemingly innocent, such as asking for a ride home at night. Or they can be clearly offensive, like when Schultz was an intern crouched on her office floor doing some filing. A lobbyist told her, “You don’t have to be on your knees every time I walk into the room.”

Schultz, now the director of the Office of Child Advocate in Jefferson City, counsels interns on how to handle life in the Capitol. She says an informal network of women try to look after younger females.

That they must do so speaks volumes.

Schultz once intervened to stop an elected official from texting one of her interns by taking the young woman’s phone and writing, “This is Kelly. Don’t text my intern.”

This year has been distinctive because the Capitol’s treatment of women has drawn attention to what’s long been seen as just ordinary behavior of the legislative crowd. Two high-profile incidents sparked renewed concern.

In the Senate, an investigation into a workplace harassment complaint is focused on the office of Democratic Sen. Paul LeVota from Independence. Two interns from the University of Central Missouri abandoned their posts in his office two months early. Their school is also investigating possible violations of Title IX, the federal statute designed to guarantee equal access to higher education for women — including their safety.

But the biggest reason the topic is getting so much attention: House Speaker John Diehl resigned from office after The Star revealed he'd exchanged sexually charged text messages with a 19-year-old college intern. Missouri Southern State University cut short the internship program she and three other students were enrolled in and brought the interns back to its Joplin campus.

Schultz said she wasn't surprised by Diehl's relationship with an intern.

"You could have inserted many names into that story," she said, "and I would not have been surprised."

Former state Sen. Luann Ridgeway, a Smithville Republican who left office in 2012, said serving in Jefferson City "puts stresses and tensions and temptations in front of you the likes of which most people in their hometowns will not have experienced."

Lawmakers get away from home, Ridgeway said, and away from "their normal accountability situation, and things are much more likely to happen."

Kenneth Warren, a professor of political science at St. Louis University, said the Capitol culture does more than present a hostile environment for women. It also creates lots of opportunity for drinking and, often, hook-ups between eager partners.

"It's a very lonely place, and then you have lobbyists who are wining and dining and spending a lot of money on booze," Warren said. "It just acts as a catalyst to promote the rather free-wheeling culture of partying and affairs."

Schultz said young people sometimes place elected officials on a pedestal and get caught up in an environment they aren't equipped to handle.

The key to dealing with unwanted advances, Schultz said, is how you react. Sending emphatic signs that you don't tolerate the game will cause most men to move on.

"It may happen," she said. "How you react to it makes a difference."

Playing defense

But being assertive isn't always easy.

"There's a very real prospect that you could suffer professionally because you're not willing to put up with it or willing to accept terms of conversation going in a direction that it is," said Casey Millburg, an associate at a consulting firm that manages nonprofits. "On top of losing

that professional opportunity, there's the risk of getting punished for not being OK with what's going on.

"It's absolutely ludicrous."

Millburg interned in the Capitol in 2010 and said that, time after time, she was forced to deal with sexually charged public shaming.

Arriving at a Capitol lunch line once, a male legislative staffer told her she could get lunch if she kissed him on the cheek. The remark was made in front of other staffers and lobbyists to see, Millburg thought, how she would respond.

Another time at a bar, a lawmaker asked how much he would have to pay to get Millburg to date one of his staffers. That remark, too, was made in front of others. Millburg spent several humiliating minutes trying to end the conversation.

Such harassment carries a professional cost for women, she said. They must devote time and energy dealing with unwanted sexual advances or comments instead of doing their jobs.

"It's really hard to talk about that sometimes with my professional guy friends," she said. "There's really no point of reference for them."

Korey Lewis interned for a Democratic senator in 2009. She vividly remembers being groped in crowded Capitol hallways, whistled at by passersby and enduring all manner of comments about her appearance.

"That was a given," Lewis said, "and a constant."

She says she had a passion for education and politics. But at the Statehouse, Lewis said she spent too much energy "fighting negative experiences and assumptions and rumors and treatment."

Kelly McCambridge remembers a trip to the Missouri Capitol when someone pointed to a group of women and referred to them as "skinterns."

"It just made my stomach turn," said the Kansas City attorney who specializes in employment law.

She says that typically when women turn to her because they were sexually harassed “they are somebody in their 30s or 40s, and this wasn’t the first time this happened to them. But when it happened to them when they were 18 or in their early 20s they didn’t have awareness that it would be illegal or what to do about it.”

For women in government or politics, who may hold aspirations to continue in the field, fear that complaining about harassment could damage their professional reputation usually scares them into silence, McCambridge said.

“Oftentimes, when a women steps forward to complain of harassment, she gets labeled a tattletale or someone who you can’t trust or someone who is too sensitive,” she said. “They are worried they’ll get blackballed and are unable to find other jobs.”

One former intern for a Democratic lawmaker says she was originally turned down for an internship in the Capitol because a lawmaker she applied to work for told her “he was attracted to me and was afraid things might go too far.”

Her experience mirrors that of many women who recently participated in a survey of congressional staffers working in Washington, D.C., by the National Journal. It found that in some offices, female staffers aren’t allowed to spend any time alone with their male bosses in order to avoid the appearance of impropriety.

Ugly atmospherics

Rep. Tracy McCreery, a St. Louis Democrat, says a fellow lawmaker pulled her aside when she was first elected in 2012 “and told me which legislators to steer clear of because they didn’t have the best reputations.”

Both men and women in the Capitol describe a sensibility reminiscent of early episodes of “Mad Men.” Twenty-four years after Anita Hill’s charges against Clarence Thomas launched a national awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace, women say they’re still commonly seen in the Capitol as possible conquests rather than as colleagues.

Lines in other workplaces are pretty clear about what’s acceptable and what isn’t, said Fatima Goss Graves, vice president for education and employment at the National Women’s Law Center. She said those lines have to be enforced by those in power.

“Individual women shouldn’t have to take on a culture of harassment by themselves,” she said. “Whoever is in charge has to make it clear that harassment is not tolerated. ... It has to come from the very top and be communicated all the way through. Otherwise, you have a situation where it is allowed to persist.”

When Todd Richardson took over in May as Missouri House Speaker following John Diehl’s resignation, he vowed to improve the legislature’s reputation.

“It’s important for us to focus on not only improving the public perception of the legislature, but to actually improve the environment,” Richardson said in an interview with The Star.

Richardson said a “majority of people who serve in the House and Senate are there for the right reasons and are not part of that negative culture.”

But, he said, “we do have to take the issue seriously and commit to doing better. ... We have to change the culture in Jefferson City.”

One of Richardson’s first actions as speaker was dispatching a group to look at the House’s internship policy. Next, Richardson said, he hopes to look at the sexual harassment complaint process.

He also stressed the need for meaningful ethics reform, specifically limiting the amount of gifts lobbyists can give to lawmakers to rein in some aspects of the Jefferson City party scene.

“It’s important that (legislative leaders) convey to our members that we expect a higher standard and a better level of behavior,” Richardson said.

Rep. Diane Franklin, a Camdenton Republican, sits on the panel reviewing the intern policy. She says she expects the group to present its findings later this year.

But as for any bad reputation the Capitol may have garnered, Franklin agrees with Richardson that it’s a small number of bad apples making the vast majority of lawmakers look bad.

“I haven’t seen anything pertaining to unwanted advances in my time here,” Franklin said. “I’ve had five interns. They’ve all been female. And I haven’t had any of them have any issues.”

Felts says she still thinks about that night back in 2008.

These days, she's still in the Capitol a few days a week during sessions in her work for a health care membership association. She doesn't have the same problems with males any longer. Maybe, she said, it's the no-nonsense vibe she gives off.

But she notes that dealing with sexual harassment in the Capitol is difficult. There are so many overlapping interests.

Reputations are on the line. Friendships, too. And both of those, she said, are critical in a Statehouse environment.

"You can't just report it," she said.

The Star's Dave Helling contributed to this report.

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Denise Lindenbusch Bateman

It was common and encouraged for secretaries of lobbyists to accompany legislators to dinner or bars when I worked for a firm here in Jefferson City. I resented it and left after one session. Lawmakers have been doing this forever, they spend more time acting like they're at a bachelor party than actually working for their constituents.

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I think they got off on the wrong foot when they announced they were reviewing the intern policy. The interns are not seducing the legislators, necessarily! It's the legislators that need to check their testosterone at the door. Let's start with their policy!

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If we can chemically shut down the hormones that causes emotions, we would be better off.

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I would like names and associates so we know who to vote out of office or just vote out all of the scum bags..

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