

# Testimony underway in Solebury School sex abuse scandal

by Matt Coughlin Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, October 14, 2014 4:00 pm

A Bucks County grand jury is investigating decades-old claims of child sex abuse by former faculty at the Solebury School.

School head Thomas Wilschutz issued two letters to the school community acknowledging some former faculty and staff sexually abused students in the 1950s through the 1970s. The letters were posted to the school website and mailed to alumni. In the first, Wilschutz acknowledged the abuse. In the second, he disclosed a sexual relationship between Robert Shaw, the school's founder, and an unidentified student.



Carole Trickett says she is that student. Trickett is one of two former Solebury School graduates who say they'll be speaking to the grand jury that has been empaneled on this issue. Trickett, 77, of Maine, said she's scheduled to testify in November.

Trickett said she was 14 when Shaw, then 51 or 52, began a sexual relationship with her. She still has a note she said proves school officials knew about the relationship. Trickett said she knows Shaw, who died in 1982, was inappropriate with other students.

The Bucks County District Attorney's Office declined to comment on the grand jury. Attorneys, court employees and jurors are prevented by law from revealing the existence of a grand jury or of any of its proceedings. Witnesses are not, however.

In a statement to the newspaper, Wilschutz said: "With respect to your inquiry regarding a grand jury, you really need to check with the district attorney's office on that question. I do not have any direct knowledge that such a step has been taken and to the best of my knowledge no one at Solebury School has been contacted regarding this matter."

Trickett said years after Shaw's death, in the 1990s, she contacted the school and was told by a now-retired headmaster: "Can't you tell yourself you were just a kid and forget it?"

What she didn't know then was the school was in the process of settling a civil lawsuit involving an affair between a music teacher in his mid-20s and a 15-year-old girl. The teacher, charged with sex crimes and sent to state prison, gave her drugs and encouraged her to have sex with others.

In recent years, Trickett said she repeatedly contacted Wilschutz about the abuse, leading up to his letters to the school community in July and September.

Peter Robbins, a member of the class of 1969, said he was shocked by the allegations against Shaw — but not by the allegations of sex abuse at the school.

Robbins, 63, of Albany, New York, said he's testifying before the grand jury Thursday and will tell jury members he was raped by a teacher and others, that the school knew about it and nothing was done.

Robbins said a teacher and one of the teacher's friends took him to a home off campus in 1968. He said he was drugged and awoke to find himself bleeding. He fled the home and went to the school's headmaster, who told him he'd probably been raped.

The headmaster took Robbins to be treated for his injuries and, Robbins said, he knew what had happened. But the teacher kept teaching at the school.

"For many, many, many years, I believed it was my fault, that I did something that made them do this to me," Robbins said. "It's something that stays with you forever, something you learn to live with."

After he graduated, Robbins said he moved as far away from the school as he could. He became a teacher, he said, because he wanted to make sure what happened to him didn't happen to anyone else.

"I want to hold the school responsible," Robbins said. "They got away with it and apparently I'm not the only one it happened to and nothing was done. They might as well have hung a sign that said 'If you are a pedophile come here, you will get away with it.'"

Criminal charges and civil lawsuits are not likely in the cases of Robbins or Trickett because the statutes of limitations ran out a long time ago, according to state law.

Yeshiva University law professor Marci A. Hamilton said a prosecutor can bring criminal charges as of result of claims by alumni who graduated in 1995 or later. For a civil claim against the school to proceed, the plaintiff would have to be from the class of 2000 or a later class.

Hamilton, a Washington Crossing resident who has been following the Solebury School case, specializes in statutes of limitations and child protection laws and advocates for extending legal timelines.

In 2007, in the wake of a grand jury report on child sexual abuse in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, state law expanded the statute of limitations.

According to Hamilton, a prosecutor could pursue a criminal case if the sexual abuse victim hadn't turned 30 by Jan. 27, 2007. And that victim has until his or her 50th birthday to report the crime.

Pursuing a civil claim against the school would follow a different legal timeline.

In 2002, Pennsylvania expanded the eligibility to file a civil suit in sex abuse cases after a series of coverups were documented by The Boston Globe. As a result, if someone turned 20 on or after Aug. 26,

2002, that person would have until age 30 to file a civil suit against a perpetrator of child abuse.

In the Solebury School case, she said, a victim who graduated in 2000 or later would be legally able to file a civil suit.

There is no legal remedy for allegations by victims who fall outside the statute of limitations, Hamilton said.

"The impact of not being able to obtain justice — they never get that moment where society says to them: This is not your fault," Hamilton said.

Hamilton said survivors of child abuse experience shame and guilt. According to her experience, the average survivor reaches his or her early 40s before making allegations.

But, she said, there are some cases where people haven't come forward until their 80s and others where kids have reported being abused.

There's a lot of embarrassment and humiliation felt by victims, Hamilton said, and usually they're dealing with someone — a parent, a teacher or another adult — who they love and they don't know how to process the abuse.

Trickett said she knows there won't be any charges in her case and no lawsuit. She said she does know there are allegations of abuse in 2005 that could lead to charges. And she said she's glad for that victim. But there are more than just charges and lawsuits to be considered, she said.

"We can hold the school responsible for a crime that was covered up for decades — that needs to be known," Trickett said. "We were dishonored as children. Now they can show us some honor."