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## Gymnast says she has forgiven abuser

Rachael Denhollander speaks at CANDLES' 'Be the Change' event

By Sue Loughlin Tribune-Star Oct 2, 2018



How society poorly treats victims: Former USA Gymnastics athlete Rachael Denhollander discusses her view on society's treatment of sexual abuse victims before her presentation on Tuesday at ISU. Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

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Former gymnast Rachael Denhollander said in Terre Haute Tuesday she has forgiven Dr. Larry Nassar for sexually abusing her when she was a teenager.

Denhollander, a victim advocate and educator, was the first woman to file a police report and speak publicly against Nassar, former U.S.A. Gymnastics team doctor convicted of sexually abusing numerous young women. He was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison.

She spoke Tuesday at Indiana State University as part of the CANDLES Holocaust Museum “Be the Change” Film and Speaker Series.



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. GarzaThe freedom of forgiveness: Former gymnast Rachael Denhollander says by forgiving Dr. Larry Nassar she can now enjoy the joyful things in life. Denhollander spoke on Tuesday on the Indiana State University campus.

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person in a community, she said.

In a media interview prior to her presentation, Denhollander said, “I do extend forgiveness to him. Larry had not asked for it. But I have extended it to him. I think that’s an important step to take, because it allows me to release bitterness. It allows me to release resentment, to release the obsessive desire for answers and to focus on the joyful things in life.”

But forgiveness doesn’t mean accepting or overlooking the evil that Nassar brought about. “I can speak the truth about what happened, I can call it the evil that it is, because it was evil, and I can do that at the same time as forgiveness,” she said.

Nassar’s abuse of young gymnasts has been described as the worst sexual abuse case in U.S. sports history.

Denhollander also addressed why victims of sexual abuse often aren’t willing to come forward. “Sexual assault victims are rarely believed when they come forward,” especially when it involves a high profile

She pointed to recent high profile cases, including that of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, who has been accused by Christine Blasey Ford of sexual assault when both were in high school in the early 1980s.

“I would say the way you are treating the survivor now is why they waited so long to come forward. When you re-victimize and blame and shame and attack the character of someone who speaks up, you are explaining right then and there why they didn’t come forward,” Denhollander said. “It’s hard enough to stand against your abuser. It’s almost impossible to stand against everyone else, especially when the wound and trauma is so fresh.”

Denhollander said she hears from many sexual abuse survivors from all walks of life. “I can tell you unequivocally the message that’s being sent now [to sexual abuse survivors] is sit down and shut up, because if you speak out against an abuser who is part of our community, we will attack you.”

She said it shouldn’t be that way. “We should want the truth regardless of who is being accused.”



**Eva Mozes Kor**  
@EvaMozesKor

A great experience & honor to have Rachael Denhollander speak at ISU about her experiences of being an sexually abused victim who healed herself by forgiving her abuser. We shared our experiences & our triumph of self-healing through forgiveness-thank you Rachael [@R\\_Denhollander](#)

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Denhollander, married and the mother of four young children, also commented on what her journey has been like, from when she first came forward with her accusation against Nassar to where her life is now.

“It’s been a lot of ups and downs, and I think that’s something that is important for people to understand when it comes to healing from any form of trauma,” she said. “It’s a process and you need to give yourself grace to move through that process, a place to grieve and a place to be able to put it behind you for awhile, too, and focus on the other joyful things in life.”

“It really is mountains and valleys,” she said.

Denhollander said she wanted to go forward with her story of abuse by Nassar because “I was convinced that was the only way Larry would be able to be stopped.” Public pressure was necessary “to overcome just the privilege he enjoyed with his reputation and the two major organizations that were backing him and protecting him,” she said.

Denhollander doesn’t view herself as a hero, she said.

“The word that comes to mind most is just grateful. I’m grateful for the result — it was far beyond what I expected and hoped for. I’m grateful for the cultural shift that I think we’re starting to see. I’m grateful for so many women who came forward and supported me. We did it together. Everything that happened, and the cultural awareness and shift we are seeing, we did it together,” she said.

The title of her ISU talk was, “From Justice to Forgiveness,” and for part of her presentation, she was on stage answering questions with Eva Kor, founder of CANDLES Holocaust Museum.

For her work as an advocate and educator on sexual assault, Denhollander was named one of TIME Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2018.

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### Sue Loughlin

Sue Loughlin has been a reporter at the Tribune-Star for more than 30 years. She covers general news with a focus on education.

