

SHELDON KENNEDY'S POSITIVE STATE

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CALGARY - You can be excused for ignoring the horrific details of the sexual abuse that allegedly took place at Penn State's football factory. Some things are just too tough to stomach.

But you cannot be excused for ignoring abuse.

And that, says Sheldon Kennedy, is the lesson that should be learned from news Penn State housed football's version of Graham James for more than a decade and essentially did nothing to stop it.

Instead of having the story drum up painful memories of his time under the control of James, Kennedy's reaction to the news is shockingly positive.

"I don't see this as a failure at all — I think if anything this is a success," said the former NHLer who has dedicated his life to abuse prevention and education.

"We've got all these victims coming forward against one of the most powerful organizations in that state. To me, that's what we want — we want people to disclose, step forward and make sure this sort of stuff isn't institutionalized."

Former Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky has been charged with molesting eight boys in 15 years, including at the Penn State Football complex where he was spotted abusing children on several occasions.

While tragic, the fact that those who knew — or ought to have known — are being crucified by fans and the media (if not prosecutors just yet) sends yet another powerful message that we all have a duty to report signs of abuse.

"We look at all the adults that surrounded the situation there and in my case, and there were probably lots of people that had a gut feeling that something wasn't right," said Kennedy, who heads up the Respect Group, which develops programs to help stop abuse in sport, in schools and in the workplace.

"We need to give them empowerment and the tools to act on their gut feeling. Think about it — Calgary is probably the most educated city in the world. Yet if you walked down the sidewalk and asked any administrators or youth leaders to give you the definition of abuse and what your legal obligations are, odds are not very good they'd know. But yet we're expected to do the right thing and react responsibly.

"This is a platform for Penn State and U.S. football and U.S. sport to get up to snuff, change and start the prevention thing.

"What are you going to do about it?"

The opportunity is immense for NCAA administrators if they chose to do the right thing.

Hockey Canada faced a similar situation when Kennedy stepped forward with his horrific story in the mid-90s, and now it's a world leader due largely to the Calgary resident's tireless efforts.

"Canada is recognized by the IOC and around the world as being very, very proactive when it comes to dealing with abuse, and we should be proud of that — we've come a long way," said Kennedy, whose latest project has him working closely with Edmonton-Spruce Grove MP Rona Ambrose on a program to reach out to all Canadians on abuse prevention and education.

"It's huge, because there was a time we didn't want to even look at these issues," Kennedy said. "It all stems from the Graham James situation, and hockey has taken the leadership role. The U.S. is 14 years behind."

And Penn State officials have started taking the fall for failing to report the alleged incidents involving the former employee — both school president Graham Spanier and head football coach Joe Paterno were fired Wednesday night. Not only would proper reporting have saved their jobs and reputations, but it could have prevented further abuse.

"The whole idea is to em-power the 98% of good people, not to catch the 2% of bad guys because that's like finding needles in a haystack," Kennedy added. "I don't think we'll ever stop abuse from happening, but we can stop it from being institutionalized. With education, we can police ourselves."