

SEX, LIES AND PHYS ED

He was a star athlete at Hammonton High. She was the hottest teacher in school. What happens when every boy's fantasy becomes reality?

ROLLING STONE

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In the wrestling room of Hammonton High School in rural New Jersey, gym teacher Traci Tapp was busy folding up the ping-pong tables. Fifteen-year-old Jason Eickmeyer watched her as he ran laps around the room, sweating out a few final ounces before his afternoon wrestling match. The end-of-school bell had rung, and the last-period gym class had stampeded back to the locker room, leaving Ms. Tapp to clean up alone. Jason snuck another look as she struggled over a table. He jogged over to give her a hand.

"Thanks," Ms. Tapp said with a slow, amused smile. She was slim, blond and sporty, in khakis and a blue-striped rugby shirt. Jason remembers thinking that it looked like the shirt Steve always wore on *Blue's Clues*.

"What's your name?" she asked as they flipped the table onto its side.

"Jason Eickmeyer."

"Jason Eickmeyer?" She was studying him now. "So the rumors are true."

"What rumors?"

Ms. Tapp shot him a grin and gave Jason a response that he's never forgotten. "I heard you're pretty cute."

She continued folding the table legs while Jason blushed. "You're not so bad yourself," he stammered. He had heard some rumors about Ms. Tapp too — she had a thing for students — but could still hardly believe it: Was she checking him out? As he tried to focus on making small talk, he cursed himself for the stupid weight-loss get-up he was wearing, layers of sweatshirts with a trash bag underneath to trap the heat — he was like a giant smelly pillow. Nevertheless, once the tables were stowed, she told him with a grin, "Maybe I'll see you around" — a statement, not a question.

Over the next few days, Jason ran into Ms. Tapp in the halls, where she'd give him playful shoves, then walk him to class while chatting about his upcoming meets. A jock with a top-heavy swagger and a sweet smile, Jason knew those signals well. He had just never seen them thrown by a 26-year-old before, let alone a teacher. Attractive and outgoing, Traci Tapp was among the most popular instructors at Hammonton High.

When the grading period turned over days later, Jason discovered he had a new phys ed teacher. "What do you think they should play today?" Ms. Tapp would ask him at the start of class. She told him not to bother changing into his gym clothes; instead, while his classmates dutifully played volleyball or ping-pong, he and Ms. Tapp would stand on the sidelines, deep in conversation. Ms. Tapp looked into Jason's eyes as they talked, and sometimes touched his arm, which sent his adrenaline surging. She asked him to call her by her first name, Traci — or better yet, her nickname, "TJ." When

she encouraged him to visit her during school, Jason began spending three periods a day at Ms. Tapp's side. And three weeks after they met, on Valentine's Day 2003, Jason marched into the room where Ms. Tapp was on detention duty and asked for her number.

Ms. Tapp's eyes went wide. "Well, I can't give you my phone number," she told him, as the detention kids pretended not to listen. "But there's something called 411."

Jason shot home after practice that day, in such a hurry that he was still wearing his book bag while he dialed the telephone.

She didn't even say hello, he recalls. "Looks like you did your homework," Ms. Tapp said.

For the next week, Jason and Ms. Tapp spent hours on the phone, with Jason downstairs in the kitchen whispering into the receiver while his parents slept. He felt he was speaking not to a teacher but to his soulmate. He read her some of his poetry, making them both cry. He told her about his volatile father, John, a former crane operator, who was now bedridden due to multiple sclerosis. Mornings before school, it was Jason's responsibility to haul John into the shower and on and off the toilet — tasks he performed without complaint but which only stoked his father's fury. Jason told Ms. Tapp about his mother, Tina, struggling to stretch her hospice-nurse's salary to support her ailing husband and three kids. Jason's parents had never gotten along, but now, on the cusp of divorce, their yelling had made Jason's home life unbearable.

School had become his escape. Cheerful and outgoing, Jason reveled in his friends and in the release of football and wrestling. Sports meant everything to him: It gave him a second family, complete with coaches who were part buddies, part father figures. Sports had also made Jason a star, not only in the halls of Hammonton High (where the principal would holler "You're the future!" at him) but also within the close-knit farming town of Hammonton, New Jersey ("The Blueberry Capital of the World"), a place where Jason's photo often graced the local paper and everyone came to Blue Devils football games yelling "Ike!" — short for Eickmeyer. But there was a practical reason for Jason's athletic drive, which he confided to Ms. Tapp: No way could he afford college, and with his C average, an athletic scholarship was his only shot at a decent school.

Then one Friday night, a week after he asked for her number, Jason and Ms. Tapp were on the phone as they were almost every evening, gossiping about the kids at Hammonton High, throwing in a suggestive comment here and there. (Tapp, who denies having been sexually involved with her students, declined repeated requests for an interview.) By that point, according to Jason, Ms. Tapp called him "my little boyfriend" and would tell him what a great body he had; she'd also volunteered that she slept naked. "That's it, I'm coming over," Jason would always threaten. To which Ms. Tapp would squeal, "No, you can't! You can't!"

Except tonight, she said, "OK!"

Jason wasn't expecting that one. "OK?"

"Yeah."

He wasn't old enough to drive, so he asked his 19-year-old cousin Amy Moyer for a ride. On the way, he had her stop at a Gulf station to buy Ms. Tapp a rose.

For Jason, it felt like the classic schoolboy daydream was about to come to life. But as such liaisons increasingly show up in police blotters, what used to be regarded as little more than harmless trysts are now regularly prosecuted as crimes. “Over the past three or four years, there have been more cases than ever before,” says Robert Shoop, an educational-law expert at Kansas State University and author of *Sexual Exploitation in Schools: How to Spot It and Stop It*. In the span of a single week last year, three female teachers were arrested for sleeping with male students — and that was just in Tampa, Florida. (“I loved today,” 28-year-old math teacher Stephanie Ragusa had texted her alleged 14-year-old lover at Davidsen Middle School. “The sex was amazing.”) Those arrests stole the spotlight from married English teacher Jennifer Mally, 26, who that same week pleaded guilty in Arizona for her affair with a 16-year-old, often conducted in the back of her Nissan Xterra. Two months earlier, Rebecca Bogard, a 27-year-old science teacher in Mississippi, allegedly seduced a 15-year-old in her Jaguar with plates that read GRRRRR, and later texted the boy, “I love you, yeah it was the best, which night was the best 4 you, I’m sensitive but not sore, you were good.” Scandalous as those cases were, they were followed by more arrests — notably that of Julie Pritchett, 34, a teacher in Alabama accused of seducing *eight* members of the high school baseball team.

Given such salacious details, the media tend to treat these cases as entertainment — at least, that is, when the teacher is a woman. But as Jason Eickmeyer was about to discover, the incidents don’t always end cleanly for the boys involved. Long before the police were summoned, Tapp’s supposed lovefests with students were the talk of Hammonton High. Indeed, the story of Jason Eickmeyer and his gym teacher is as much a story about the hothouse environment of high school, a place where gossip is currency, hooking up is the norm and allegiances shift as frivolously as any other teenage trend. Blur the lines between teachers and students, and it creates a backdrop that’s part *Penthouse Forum*, part *Melrose Place* — a reflection of a broader cultural shift, in which a boy who has sex with his teacher is viewed not as a survivor of sexual abuse, but as the luckiest kid in 10th grade. Why treat a woman like a criminal, after all, when all she did was give some randy teen the best night of his life?

After buying a rose for Ms. Tapp, Jason had Amy drop him off at the Dunkin’ Donuts by his teacher’s house. He hugged himself against the cold; it was February, but he’d thought a coat would look uncool. A minute later, Ms. Tapp rolled up in her gold Infiniti. She wore red sweatpants and a blue O’Neill T-shirt, and Jason could smell wine on her breath. They went straight to her condo.

Leaning back against Ms. Tapp’s kitchen counter, his hands shaking, Jason took a photo out of his pocket. He’d brought it as a conversation starter, since Ms. Tapp had expressed disbelief that he had lost 33 pounds to make weight for wrestling. She examined the picture of Jason shirtless at age 14: washboard abs, pecs like cliffs. “I need something to compare it to,” she said. Jason whipped off his shirt. Instantly, he and his phys ed teacher were locked in the most passionate kiss he’d ever known.

When at last they separated, Ms. Tapp asked if he wanted to watch a movie. In her basement, Jason settled onto the black-leather couch while Ms. Tapp switched on the DVD player. “We’ll just watch whatever’s in,” she said.

It was *American Pie*.

The clothes came off quickly. But after less than a minute of sex on the carpet, Ms. Tapp stopped him, saying, “We can’t do this.” Jason was OK with that; the night had already exceeded his expectations. He carried Ms. Tapp up to bed, then returned downstairs to straighten up. That’s when he

noticed a framed photo next to the big-screen TV that showed Ms. Tapp in some tropical locale with a scruffily handsome teenager. Jason recognized him as a kid named Fred Long, who had graduated Hammonton High two years earlier.

Jason had heard rumors about the pair, of course: that not only had Ms. Tapp and her student been an item, but they had even lived together after Fred graduated, when he was 18 and she was 24. Fred would later give a police statement insisting he and his gym teacher had been just friends his senior year, but that on graduation night in June 2001, the couple “rode off into the sunset” (stopping first for a six-pack of Corona and some Jack Daniels kickers) to consummate their relationship. Police were skeptical. “It seemed clear that whatever transpired between them was prior to graduation,” says Detective Joel Frederico of the Hammonton police. “And we have information that doesn’t support his version. But according to him, no.” And while Fred sticks to his post-graduation story, an ex-girlfriend says he confided otherwise. “He told me they started dating when he was a student,” she says. “But that was no secret — everyone at Hammonton knew that.”

After Jason cleaned up Ms. Tapp’s basement, he returned to her bedroom. From under the covers Ms. Tapp urged him not to leave. Jason jumped into her bed for a second romp, then they drifted off to sleep, with Ms. Tapp’s head resting on Jason’s chest. It was the most beautiful moment of Jason Eickmeyer’s young life.

The next morning, however, was a very different scene. “I can’t believe this is happening!” Ms. Tapp shrieked. “I’m gonna get in trouble!” That annoyed Jason. “I *told* you,” he insisted, “I’m not gonna fuckin’ say anything!” They drove off in her car, with Jason’s seat reclined all the way back; Ms. Tapp left him at the high school, and Jason had to run the two miles home.

But despite his best intentions, Jason wasted little time in telling his friends. That very night, at a house party, he pulled up his shirt to show a half-dozen of his buddies the scratches on his back. The guys went nuts. “We couldn’t believe it,” one friend recalls. “We were still virgins, and he was hitting it with teachers! It was pretty fucking sweet.”

Gym class on Monday was awkward. “You can’t expect this not to be weird for me,” Ms. Tapp told Jason as they pedaled beside one another on stationary bikes. She proposed a pact: They would hold off on their relationship for two years until Jason graduated. Only then would they be together. Jason agreed. Based on the photo he’d seen at her house, he knew it was a realistic plan.

That’s when, as Jason recalls, his assistant football coach, Mike Scibilia, walked into the room. Besides Tapp, Scibilia was the only other grown-up Jason had trusted with the details of his fracturing home life. Jason reached out to shake his coach’s hand. But Scibilia ignored Jason’s outstretched hand. Instead, he looked pointedly from Jason to Ms. Tapp and back again — and Jason realized, his stomach knotting, that he wasn’t the only one interested in Ms. Tapp.

And just like that, Jason lost Ms. Tapp to the dark-haired, handsome, 30-year-old Scibilia. He would see them talking in the halls, with Ms. Tapp giving Scibilia that sleepy-eyed look, and seethe with jealousy and rage: They were the two people he had loved most at school, and they had betrayed him. Jason couldn’t even avoid the sight of them, since Scibilia doubled as an aide to the wrestling team, and the couple would attend Jason’s matches together, with Ms. Tapp perched on Scibilia’s lap.

Then, in March, during a crucial match in the district finals, everything fell apart for Jason. He was

up 5-2, with only 49 seconds left in the match, when he split an eyebrow. Since the bleeding couldn't be stopped, Jason was disqualified. Everything he had worked for that season was over; his opponent, meanwhile, would go on to become state champ.

As Jason lay on the mat, a trainer stitching up his forehead, Ms. Tapp hurried down from the bleachers to kneel beside him and caress his stomach. At that moment, something broke inside Jason. The two things he wanted more than anything — the glory and the girl — were both right there, yet beyond his reach. He burst out crying. "I don't want second place," he told Ms. Tapp and, with everyone watching, handed her his runner-up medal.

From the start of Traci Tapp's career at Hammonton High, in January 2001, the kids considered her more peer than teacher. She taught a health class that was basically a hangout session, where she would hand out a work sheet, then select some lucky kids to sit by her desk and shoot the breeze. With girls, Ms. Tapp was chatty and knowing with a hint of attitude, like a cool older sister. With boys, there was something extra: the way she touched their biceps and told them how good they looked; the way she'd bend down to reveal a thong peeking out from her warm-up pants. With some boys, Ms. Tapp's flirtations went a step further. According to students familiar with the incident, she asked two seniors if they wanted to meet up with her at a bar. She gave out her IM screen name: "TappItIn17."

A few weeks after she started teaching, Ms. Tapp singled out one 17-year-old football player. He would later tell police that he and Ms. Tapp would meet in her office within the girls' locker room, where she would rest a hand on his crotch and tell him she could show him a better time than any high school girl. Although he initially denied to police that he and Ms. Tapp had sex, the student — now 25 — acknowledges that they slept together on two occasions. "Not to be crude, but what 17-year-old guy is gonna complain about being with Ms. Tapp? Come on!" he says, explaining why he denied it to police. "And it's not like I was the only one."

Before coming to Hammonton, Tapp was a teenage jock from the middle-class strip-mall suburb of Marlton, New Jersey, the daughter of a teacher and a businessman — her father owned an elevator company. She had been well liked at Cherokee High, where she led the Lady Chiefs soccer team, scoring a record 103 goals. After a pre-college trip to Europe, Tapp went on to rewrite the soccer scoring records for the College of New Jersey as well. She majored in health and phys ed, graduating in May 2000, and a few months later went to work at Hammonton.

At Hammonton High, other teachers found her upbeat and engaging, if a bit of an airhead. "This probably isn't very nice to say, but she was probably not real smart," says Teckla Volpe, a retired English teacher. "But a very warm person, very bubbly, with a good attitude." After basketball games, when she'd head out to a local bar for a drink with other teachers, she always made sure to invite everyone. Maybe that's why, when rumors began circulating about Ms. Tapp — "This was a prime source of gossip," says Volpe — her colleagues didn't take them seriously. The faculty liked Ms. Tapp too much to want to believe them.

Though the general belief about women who proposition students holds that there's something wrong with them — a mental disorder, a history of abuse — experts are beginning to question that assumption. "Usually it's someone who is quite normal but has poor boundaries and has not had success with adult relationships," says Stephen Braveman, a sex therapist noted for his work with male victims of sexual abuse. "When a teacher spends six or eight hours a day in her classroom,

she's going to bond with the teenagers." And when a female teacher isn't far removed from her own high school years, it can be all too easy to get swept up in the turbulence of teen romance and live out her prom-queen fantasies. "Throw in a little bit of immaturity, and we have the perfect storm for sexual abuse of this kind," Braveman says. "They're lonely. They're looking for love, and they're finding it in the wrong place."

Soon after Ms. Tapp's alleged dalliance with the senior football player, she became friendly with senior Fred Long, who moved in with her after his 2001 graduation. A third boy, a Hammonton baseball star, would tell police that after he graduated in June 2002, his flirtation with Ms. Tapp culminated in a night at her house, where they watched highlight films from Tapp's high school soccer career, then got naked and masturbated together.

"Everyone thought of Ms. Tapp as a service to the community," says one former student. Girls thought otherwise, seeing her as unfair competition. Ms. Tapp apparently saw some girls as a threat as well: When Fred began dating a Hammonton freshman, Ms. Tapp fought back, taunting the girl at school. "She'd say things like, 'Fred doesn't really like you if he's calling me up and coming to my house,'" the girl recalls. "She once even pulled me out of my math class to tell me that. I went back hysterically crying." (Another gym teacher later told police that the girl cried to her about the way Ms. Tapp terrorized her — information the teacher kept to herself.)

It was during this time, with Ms. Tapp recovering from her breakup with Fred, that she started spending time with Jason Eickmeyer. And not just him: Through the grapevine Jason heard that Ms. Tapp had gotten close with one of his wrestling teammates, a 17-year-old senior who stopped speaking to Jason, sending a chill through the locker room. The senior would later insist to police that all he and Ms. Tapp would do during his frequent visits to her basement couch was watch movies and "cuddle." There was also a third boy in the mix, a junior, whose mother would tell police that when she told school administrators that Tapp was sleeping with her son — informing the principal, two vice principals, a guidance counselor, even the school-board president — they did nothing.

Jason tried to put aside his feelings for Ms. Tapp once she started dating Scibilia, but she didn't make it easy. They still had their marathon phone calls. They hung out at school, facilitated by the hall passes Ms. Tapp wrote: "Back to gym if allowed." (Police later retained one such pass, with Ms. Tapp's cellphone number scribbled on the back.) One day, Jason says, they had made out in a supply closet after a one-on-one game of basketball. Unsurprisingly, it created tension between Jason and Scibilia — a hostility Jason baited, like when he wore one of Ms. Tapp's T-shirts to school, or drew a giant penis on the blackboard for Scibilia to find, or pounded on the gym door at the sight of the couple. It prompted head football coach Pete Lancetta to demand, "What's going on with you and Traci Tapp?" Jason denied everything, promising he and Scibilia would work things out.

Yet as Jason began his junior year, he still pined for both Ms. Tapp and Scibilia's affection and approval, though he was humiliated by their rejections. Once, spying Ms. Tapp during an assembly, Jason led his friends in cries of "Whore!" As a contestant in the annual Mr. Hammonton pageant, Jason was asked onstage to name his favorite Hammonton memory. "Tappin' it down in gym class!" he yelled into the mike, and tented his thumbs and forefingers together in what the kids all recognized as an obscene sign for poon. The auditorium went wild.

Incredibly, Jason wasn't the only one acting out. When he hooked up with a girl on the soccer team, Tapp benched the girl, then confronted her in the locker room: "Are you sleeping with Ike?" The girl

denied it. "I hate liars!" Tapp said, slamming her office door behind her. "All the girls in the locker room looked at me," the girl recalls. "I felt like the whole team had turned against me." Brought up to speed by a teammate about Tapp's affair with Jason, the girl quit the team.

By this time, everyone was talking about Jason and Ms. Tapp: "I probably heard it from a million different people," a student would later tell police. A Hammonton teacher told police that her colleagues were well aware of the rumors; at one point, two teachers even rifled through Tapp's purse, looking for incriminating evidence. Gym teacher Heather Flaim told police that when students would discuss the rumor around her, she would warn them to stop, or she would have to "take it to the next level" (which she never did). Tapp herself would joke about it with faculty friends, saying, "Guess who I slept with this week!"

One day, Jason says, he was stopped in the hall by Joe Maimone, the school's police officer, who asked him outright if the gossip was true. Jason spilled his guts, telling Maimone about sex with Ms. Tapp, the love triangle with Scibilia, the way the whole thing was messing with his mind. According to Jason, the policeman hung on every word — then jubilantly high-fived him, promising not to tell anyone. (Maimone didn't return calls seeking comment. School officials maintain they handled the case "appropriately and efficiently.")

Jason didn't know why he had expected anything different. He had unburdened himself to other school authorities — an assistant wrestling coach, a biology teacher — only to have them act blasé at best, jealous at worst. (Both teachers deny that Jason ever told them about having sex with Tapp.) Jason sensed a seismic shift in how everyone at Hammonton High was treating him. Boys were worshipful and wary; girls were just plain weirded out. On the football field, Jason found himself benched — payback from Scibilia, he figured. In the locker room, Jason felt frozen out by his teammates, who were currying favor with Scibilia. In class, the teachers Jason had palled around with grew distant, and the perks he had enjoyed as a star athlete dried up: No one was excusing his tardiness anymore or nudging his grades upward. Coming at a time when his home life was collapsing — his parents had finally split — Jason was too emotionally raw to handle any of it: the loss of Ms. Tapp, his loss of status, the loss of high school as he'd known it.

In the sexual matrix of Hammonton High, the relationship between Jason and Ms. Tapp was just one of the teacher-student rumors that year. Whispers swirled about a blond junior girl (who has since become a porn actress) who was sleeping with one of the coaches. Another coach on the wrestling team became the subject of talk after he was accused of approaching a lunch table full of cheerleaders, including Jason's sister, Barbara, and telling them they ought to become strippers. Jason was furious when he heard about it and attacked the coach, slamming him into the lockers until members of the wrestling team pulled them apart. (The coach, Anthony Vesper, later had his teaching certificate revoked after a conviction for weapons possession.)

During wrestling season, Jason mentally checked out, half-assing it at practice, then coming home and losing himself in a haze of pot smoke. He started skipping class. He didn't like to sit there anymore, his mind churning with the frightening thought he could no longer push away: that adults are really nothing more than overgrown children, with the same selfish flaws, petty immaturities and raging desires as anyone else.

By senior year, Jason bore little resemblance to the jock he'd once been. He turned glum and strange and angry. Without warning he would ram his head into the lockers or punch himself in the

temple. He picked fights with other boys, crazy brawls in which he'd black out and not remember details. Kids at school gave him a wide berth. Jason wasn't in school much anyway; he had quit the wrestling team, ending any hopes of a scholarship. He knew everyone was talking about him — he overheard one teacher calling him a "time bomb" — and couldn't stand even walking the halls. And there was still Traci Tapp, haunting him like a vision, appearing at his side whispering random numbers: "128." It took Jason a while to realize she was counting down the days until June, when he would turn 18 and graduate. Alone at home, Jason took solace in cutting himself, gouging gashes across his chest and watching the blood drip down.

With Jason so close to the edge, it took only a small push to send him over. That nudge came in March 2005, when Jason cursed at a teacher over whether he had signed himself out of the lunchroom. Although Jason denied the accusation, Principal James Donoghue suspended him for three days and barred him from competing in the upcoming Mr. Hammonton pageant. Furious at this final exclusion, he called his mother from the principal's office, where he was clawing his face and hitting himself in the head. Tina Eickmeyer had never heard her son so upset.

By this time, his mother knew of the affair, having overheard Jason speaking to his older brother, John, about it six months earlier. Jason had managed to calm her wailing and swore her to secrecy. "I still have months and months left in that school," he begged. "I don't want to mess things up more than they already are!" Tina had reluctantly agreed to stay silent, and bitten her tongue through countless meetings with guidance counselors to discuss her son's absences, fights and failing grades. Now, as Tina found herself on the phone with the guidance office yet again, she couldn't keep quiet anymore.

"This is all because of a relationship Jason had with a teacher!" Tina shrieked at guidance counselor Linda Cocking.

She recalls being shocked at Cocking's answer: "Mrs. Eickmeyer, you don't have to tell me. I know." Principal Donoghue saved Tina a phone call by contacting the police himself.

Jason would rather not remember the final three months of his senior year. Rooms got quiet when he walked in. "Why'd you rat her out?" students demanded. "What'd she do to you?" Ms. Tapp's popularity made Jason's snitching a violation of the highest order; by speaking to the police, he had invited the outside world into their high school bubble. His best friend since the seventh grade urged him to call the whole thing off, saying, "If you go through with this, then our friendship is over." Once, at a party, a former teammate refused to speak to Jason until he had stripped down to his boxers to prove he wasn't wearing a wire.

Jason's peers didn't know that in his initial police statement, he had tried to protect Ms. Tapp, making her seem less culpable. Or that at home afterward, he had gone berserk and locked himself in the bathroom, vomiting blood and crying hysterically — chanting "I don't want to be here anymore" — until his mother called police, begging, "I can't calm Jason down, please help me!" Police managed to coax him out of the bathroom. "I was a mess," Jason recalls. "But they were all talking to me. 'You can't beat yourself up over this, you're a kid, they're the ones that are wrong!'"

The cops, at least, believed his story — "To me, it seemed he was being truthful," says Detective Frederico — and the investigation revealed the whole tangled web. Child-welfare agents concluded that Tapp had indeed had sex with Jason, and that her acts met the definition of child sexual abuse.

"The teacher's action placed Jason at risk of serious harm," a report by the state's Institutional Abuse Investigation Unit noted. Prosecutors charged Tapp with a host of charges of sexual misconduct involving Jason, as well as two other boys. If convicted, she could have received 30 years in prison.

Instead, in February 2006, prosecutors allowed Tapp to plead guilty to a single count of "offensive touching," in which she admitted she had inappropriately touched male students' buttocks. In exchange, she agreed to surrender her license to teach in New Jersey public schools and pay a fine of \$225. Tapp received no jail time, or even probation, which surprised police chief Frank Ingemi. "There was a lot of controversy, a lot of talk about it," he says.

Because Tapp was convicted of a "petty disorderly persons offense" rather than a sex crime, she remains free to teach at any institution in New Jersey other than a public school.

The wrist slap underscores the double standard common in such cases: Women who abuse their students tend to get lighter sentences than their male counterparts. Such leniency echoes the public's shoulder-shrugging reactions to the cases. "You see women pleading no contest to lewd, lascivious behavior or sexual battery, and they get house arrest or probation," says Dean Tong, a forensic trial consultant who specializes in child abuse. "Those are crimes punishable by 15 years in prison, which is what men get."

Traci Tapp may have gotten off easy, but she was stung by her penalty. When the New Jersey Department of Education moved to revoke her teaching certificate, Tapp contested the proceedings, striking a tone of self-righteous outrage. "This case was based on 'he said, she said,'" she wrote. "It was like playing Russian roulette. I am not a gambler, especially when it comes to my life. Therefore, those five years of college, tuition and my dreams of becoming a teacher are all now pointless and went down the drain due to false allegations."

Then, in a final petulant flourish, Tapp sounded more like one of her teenage students than a woman of 29 years. "Now, you decide!" she told the state's top educators. "You asked what I thought, and there you have it. Do what you have to do!"

After Jason graduated, he tried community college but lasted only half a semester. He spent a year succumbing to depression, living first with his mom and then out of his car, getting stoned by day, working nights as a stripper. He's been working construction, trying to get his act together, although he's saddled with the woes of a country-music song: behind in his rent, no health insurance, a car that won't run, walks with a limp from an on-the-job injury, can't afford to pay his therapist, owes his college \$488 in tuition. At least he has a girlfriend. She's 34, with two kids. But he still can't let go of what happened with Tapp.

"It obviously has held me back," he says, stubbing out a Parliament in his shabby apartment beside the Hammonton railroad tracks. "Society kind of cons you into feeling like, 'You are a guy, and it's not supposed to bother you.' But it really did mess me up." Seated behind a TV-tray table, Jason is a hulking presence in a black Affliction T-shirt and a baseball cap atop his shaved head, with the huge arms and thick neck of a comic-book superhero. The kitchen cabinets behind him are empty except for a deflating Mylar balloon from his recent 21st birthday.

A kid saddled with as many troubles as Jason might have been heading for a downfall anyway, with or without Ms. Tapp. But, she initiated the Oedipal chain of events that served as the catalyst. Jason

brought a lawsuit against Tapp and the school district, but he won't be receiving his day in court. In October, the suit was dismissed by a federal judge because Jason had waited too long to file it, and the statute of limitations had run out.

It says much about Jason's infatuation with Tapp — and his total misread of the situation — that once the criminal proceedings were over, he somehow thought they would finally be together. In February 2007, a year after Tapp's plea agreement, Jason broke down and sent her a MySpace message. "God I Miss You," he wrote. "Please Give Me A Sign." Tapp was incredulous. "If you cared even a little u would have never put me in this situation," she wrote back. "I heard u went a little nuts... but j...really...you have always been a little nutty." Jason begged to see her, but Tapp refused unless he went on TV and withdrew his accusations. That evening, he surprised her by showing up at the restaurant where she worked. When Tapp fled for the kitchen, he left her a Sweet'N Low packet on which he wrote, "We can work it out."

Tapp's response, via MySpace: "Sick!!"

Today Traci Tapp works as a real estate agent. Jason claims he's no longer in love with her, yet he still defends her. "None of the hardships really had to do with her," he says. "It's not what she did to me, it's what all these other people at school were doing. Is she innocent? No. But..." He looks at his window; it's a sunny afternoon, but the blinds are closed. "I guess that's some of the problems I still have," he continues. "Because even now, I don't like her. She isn't a good person, but I'm still trying to cover her ass. It's weird."

Each August, when his peers return to college, Jason falls into a funk. He feels left behind in Hammonton, where everyone knows too much about him, but he defiantly refuses to leave. He wants to be in the faces of all those school officials whom he feels betrayed him, a reminder of their failure to protect him. And so he volunteers as a football coach for nine-year-olds in Hammonton — a job he considers his greatest joy — even though it's part of the very same school district he tried to sue. Jason even finagled a date to the Hammonton prom, just to show everyone he is still here. From time to time he runs into Scibilia, who no longer works at the school. The last time Jason spotted Scibilia — who owns a pool company whose employees wear T-shirts emblazoned with the words "We Like It Wet" — his temper got the best of him, and he chased his former coach through the streets. The confrontation ended with Jason bellowing, "You hurt me more than she did!"

"I want to get on with my life, I really do," Jason says. "I just need...*clarity*." To get there, he keeps a spiral notebook with him, jotting his jumbled thoughts in verse. And he lovingly maintains a huge trophy case in his bedroom, as well as a "wall of fame" covered with plaques and medals and framed photos of himself in his sports uniforms. It's a monument, in essence, to his innocence — to the days before Jason realized, as children inevitably do, that teachers you trusted as older, wiser friends can turn out to be complex and wary rivals, whose lessons for you often involve more pain than love. ■