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Yearbook photo of Hae Min Lee, 1999. Serial's podcast about Hae Min Lee's 1999 murder has been heard and debated by millions, but there are still countless stories and perspectives from Woodlawn High School teachers who teach and have close relationships with students Adnan Syed, Jay Wilds, Stephanie McPherson, and Hae Min Lee but declined to speak to Sarah Koenig for the podcast. I was able to sit down with some of these teachers for an exclusive conversation. I was a second-year teacher at Woodlawn High School, and like so many, I became obsessed with serial podcasts this fall. However, my experience is just a little different. Some of my Woodlawn colleagues have heard about the podcast but absolutely no one else is listening to it. I felt like I was living through this case when I drove past the Woodlawn Branch Public Library to the school parking lot and walked past Hae Lee's memorial tree on the way to the building every morning. I know certain things, such as with after-school traffic, parking arrangements and bus loops, and how unreasonable it is to drive to Best Buy in less than 20 minutes after the bell rings. I not only see the podcast aspect every day, but I also listen to the real voice of the school announcer, Jay Terry, who is heard on the podcast, and my former co-worker Inez Butler Hendrix, when I hear his testimony about hae's constant use of the after-school food stand. I was even surprised to hear my para-educator, Catrice Sneed, a 1998 Woodlawn graduate and track star, who I shared my classroom with, talk about her friendships with her characters and her perception of them. As my connection to the podcast became more real with each episode, I kept waiting for teachers and students to start gossiping about the case and reacting as strongly as I could, but that never happened, even after the last episode. I do not believe that the people closest to the events in this case were unaware of the re-emergence while the whole country was transfixed. Looks like everyone I know is listening, except for the people at Woodlawn. I practically begged my coworkers to start listening. My only successful convert is our school librarian. Photo Adnan Syed's yearbook, 1999. As my interest grew deeper and I continued to improve every detail of the Series as possible, I began to think that, as part of the community where the tragedy occurred, my students and I had a unique opportunity to find the missing information, which could shed more light on Hae's death. More importantly, with Serial being the most popular podcast of all time and its cultural relevance to my students, educational opportunities too good to miss. Fortunately, I found an article titled Why I am Teaching a Series Instead of Shakespeare, so I contacted the author, California California teacher for support, and on the 16th anniversary of Hae Min Lee's murder, I started an entire unit based around Serial in my two classes. Not surprisingly, the students have been more involved than ever. During this time, I also developed my detective skills alongside my school librarian (details about him following later) as we searched the old yearbook and considered who in the building might have more information. This brings me to this day when I recently sat down with current teachers who are not seeking fame in being part of the Serial podcast but who know the students involved best. It's an informal conversation about what it's like to be in Woodlawn during difficult times and concerned students themselves. We drank coffee, flipped the 1996-99 yearbook and talked unfiltered. Mostly, I listen. Key witness Asia McClain pictured with other Woodlawn friends. Around the table are four current Woodlawn teachers: Margaret Meg Muse, art teacher and woodlawn department chairwoman, who is the warm, maternal, friendly face around the building. Meg was contacted several times last year by Sarah Koenig to be part of the Serial podcast but refused each time and reluctantly spoke to me as well. Joining us was Tom Lawler, in his 42nd year at Woodlawn, who started as a science teacher and later became chairman of the science department and magnet coordinator. Tom has been teaching magnet students since the beginning of the program in 1992. Also in conversation with us: Rebecca Frager, the spunky librarian of Woodlawn, who always had a fresh pot of hot coffee and baked goods to greet the teacher on Monday morning. Even without hae and Serial's murders, Woodlawn would still have a reputation as a tough school, and veterans tell stories that have shaped that reputation, including one that became something of a national farce in 2004 - when an angry management panel descended into a brawl, sparked by the mother of a student who showed up and started a fight. This caught the attention of Jay Leno and the rest of the evening news. Stephanie McPherson is Jay's girlfriend and Adnan's friend. Her former teacher called Stephanie beautiful inside and out, a beautiful girl, like Hae. Hae's murder has become part of Woodlawn folklore. People know that a girl was once murdered but the details are sketchy. It's not something to talk about here. Meg and Tom explained teachers and students may have heard there were horrific crimes here, but that's all people know. In fact, even when the murder occurred, the school seemed to shrink it. In the winter of 1999, Tom said, inside the school, the story died rather quickly and things moved on. There's almost no news coverage about it, no citywide news or school follow-up. On spring break, everything is pretty much a lot And go. Until Serial arrived, those in Woodlawn - if they thought about the case at all - did not question the outcome of the trial that found Adnan guilty of the murder. It wasn't until serial's podcast that detailed, or rather the difference, of the case actually came to light. This makes the recent podcast even more interesting for teachers like Meg and Tom who see these students almost every day leading up to the murder. One of the biggest take-aways of Serial is to cast suspicion on Jay Wilds, who is portrayed as a shady character. I can hear Meg's perspective and when her partner Tom says it From any teacher, Meg knows her best. He knows Jay very differently. Meg says Jay is one of her favorite students ever. Jay would be in his classes almost every day, hanging out during or after school, often with his girlfriends Stephanie and Adnan. In a world where Jay couldn't trust many people, he felt safe in Meg's class. Adnan was crowned prom royalty. Jay is not alone in feeling that way. The art space is and has always been a safe place for many students in Woodlawn. Because of this, Meg knows regulars who hang out in her class. So it is with Jay. Meg said, He loves the movie Conan the Barbarian and Arnold Schwarzenegger is his favorite actor, meg said. He cut off my class to pierce his tongue! Although he confirmed that Jay is a rebel, he is not a character like dennis rodman this wild, as depicted in the podcast. For Meg, Jay is very bright and has diverse interests that may seem strange to the average Woodlawn student. Jay is very smart; He's right up there with the magnet kids. Meg said, yes, he gets in trouble a lot, but that's for things like cutting classes, nothing really serious. To me, Meg describes Jay as a certain type of Woodlawn kid, the type I have in almost every class I teach. You need to make a little more effort to restrain their interest. If you can't challenge them or make them think deeply, you may not see them next class. This type of child is a challenge but it feels very rewarding if you can achieve it. Jay who Meg knows is a smart and interesting young man, much different from Jay in Serial. He described her as a kind and honest person. Jay's change of perspective on his own persona at Woodlawn is one of Sarah's reinforcing inconsistencies. I can't help but think of a line in Serial when Jay says I'm Woodlawn's criminal element to everyone, but the teacher who really knows me, knows I'm not like that. For me, Meg affirms both this is true and teachers who take the time and care enough to get to know Jay, like Ms. Muse, see him as a good boy. Stephanie joins Adnan at the Proms activity center. However, Meg said: 'Jay was paranoid from the police and didn't they are at all. He said his distrust of authorities may be why he left pieces of his story when he spoke to law enforcement, because he feared how police would interpret that information. He did say there were things Jay didn't tell him at the time, but there wasn't anything from Jay's three recent interviews by 'The Intercept' that I didn't know or believe in. He insists that there is absolutely no reason Jay would kill Hae. He said Serial didn't give him enough credit. I will admit after listening to The Series I was biased against Jay because Sarah did not include testimonials about her good character. It was interesting to hear good things about Jay from a teacher who knew him well at the time. Like many listeners I was given the impression he was a liar, and a character who sketched and suspected. For what it's worth Ms. Muse paints a very different picture. On the other hand, Meg doesn't have anything bad to say about Adnan, who is also a regular in Ms. Muse's art class. Meg clearly reminisced the morning after Hae's body was found. Adnan was at school the morning after they found his body, I know the facts because they called me to the nurse's office and he was hysterical. He just threw himself at me crying and he said 'I can't believe he's dead, I can't believe he's dead' and I really believed him at the time. She also remembers a little detail about Hae and Adnan's relationship that year and says, I remember when she got the coat from him, in connection with the Christmas present she received from Hae just before she disappeared. After listening to Serial, he said: 'I think Adnan deserves another day in court because there's a hole in the story. I hope the evidence is so strong and the case so rigorous that the truth, whatever it is, wins this time. Serial Adnan's portrayal of a model student is in keeping with Tom Lawler's memory. As a magnet teacher, Tom teaches Adnan, Stephanie and Hae. Tom said: Adnan was a good student, smart.... I've never seen him hostile to other children or seen any kind of cruel line.... It's really surprising that he could do this. In the podcast Adnan actually describes something he learned in Mr. Lawler's computer application class when he made an analogy trying to figure out the case to look at two charts with the same data from the price of tea at C-Mart and 7-11 and see two different things. Jay and Stephanie took a break. Said a former teacher who guided him, Jay was very intelligent; He's up there with the magnet kids. What about Stephanie, perhaps the podcast's greatest mystery? Tom has it in his magnet class, and he's one of Meg's students. Thousands of serial listeners and bloggers are avid with conspiracy theories they are sure to convince involved in the murder. Meg said she didn't see how Stephanie could even be part of the story. As reflected in many of Stephanie's photos in the yearbook, she is Woodlawn's golden child like Hae. Stephanie and Hae are good friends, meg said and described Stephanie as beautiful inside and out, a beautiful girl, like Hae. Tom said Stephanie was one of the smartest students in the school and an amazing athlete. Obviously she was one of the prettiest girls in school. However, when it comes to Jay and Stephanie's relationship, Meg said, Stephanie's parents completely disapprove of Jay. Stephanie can see the kindness in Jay, but her parents can't see her rough exterior past. Something the series misinterpreted about Woodlawn in the late 1990s was the nature of the magnet program, veteran teachers said. Tom describes the magnet kids like family in a variety of ways. In the 90s, magnet kids took every class together except the gym and art and even took their classes in separate parts of the building. With such closeness, it wouldn't be strange if Adnan would buy Stephanie a present for her birthday. They all bought each other presents and hung out together inside and outside the school, Meg said. In 1999, says Tom, there would be no more than 25 seniors in the magnet program (Serial says 30 to 40). It may be worth considering the facts when digesting conspiracy theories about the love triangle alluded to in Serial. But, in the end, after listening to Serial's every word and returning to their own experiences with Adnan, Jay and the other principals in this story, what conclusions did Meg and Tom draw? The Baltimore Sun called Adnan a golden boy—here he stood with friends at the ball. One of the most revealing questions I asked was, After going through it, and then listening to the podcast fifteen years later, what was your reaction? Meg starts by saying I'll admit to being as fixated on her as anyone else in the world... Tom intersects, I'm going to take it one step further, because you know kids, it's personal and alluring, these are our students! To reflect on this question, Meg had to take a step back to consider what her position was before Serial. Meg said, The day after Adnan was arrested the detective came to the school and questioned one of the teachers who had him in class. Detectives told me that they had a lot of evidence against Adnan. Despite his confusion and sadness, he took detectives' word for it and assumed he had been put in jail for years. Looking back, I trust Jay. But I trust Adnan too, says Meg. Jay's story is more in. But now, having absorbed everything he learned in Serial, with so many holes in the story and trial, he says: I still think there is that Jay and Adnan were abandoned. They both don't tell the whole story. So I have to ask, What did your gut tell you to happen? Meg didn't want to go on the record with what she really believed but she explained, I don't want to think I know a student who killed someone, she said, adding, I hope serial killer Gwynn Oak will show up in her DNA, and it will be someone else. Finally, I ask, Do you think what the average listener should know that they don't know? For most people, and I know this because I've seen through several blogs, it's not like real people to them, Meg reflects. It's just a character, it's like a CSI episode for them. But they are teenagers, they are children (sighs)... Kids, no one's trying to connect with real people. A few days after our conversation, Meg sent me an email. She wrote: 'When I thought of our conversation this morning, I realised that I had done exactly what I promised myself I wouldn't do - I had given you the interview that Sarah Koenig wanted me to give her. I don't want to be 'Episode 13.' I don't want anything I might have said or what you might think I said to look like I think one person is now more likely to be guilty. Even years later, veteran teachers feel a connection with these students and haven't quite shaken the sense of loss. Adnan's in jail. Jay was marked with suspicion. Most tragically, Hae's gone. With unprecedented attention having landed on this case, some listeners may forget that the victim and the defendant and the witnesses are real people with family and friends and... Teacher. For every listener, Serial is an excellent and interesting story. But for some, it is a personal, real and traumatic story. Over the past few months, the topic of Adnan, Jay and Stephanie's relationship with Hae's murder has appeared almost everywhere. From dinner parties to SNL skits, Adnan's screams are sure to do it! or Jay is really lying! can be heard throughout the country. For most people, these speculative thoughts and statements come quickly and easily. Talking about these former students feels like talking about two characters in a popular movie or book. However, for Meg Muse and Tom Lawler, individuals like Adnan or Jay are not abstract, distant characters. For my students, Hae is an example of a senior who is ready for an outstanding college at a school where they know the odds are stacked against you to be successful. As outsiders look inside, we all want to know who did what. But if there is to be taken from the podcast The series is the unfortunate story of a girl with a promising future who lost her life too early. I think the teacher who knows Hae best, who quit her job at Woodlawn just a few years ago, summed this up best in a recent Facebook post: Hae Lee is closest and best students at Woodlawn High. We hung out like friends. Hae is very intelligent, funny, beautiful, light-hearted, athletic and kind. He was one of 5 honorary students coming with me to France that summer. He was also my senior intern, hand-selected by me. I have to testify in the first murder trial and also the second trial. NPR called me to be interviewed for a podcast and I declined for some personal reason. I pray for every teacher, student, friend and family member touched by this murder because it is so painful and sad for all parties involved. Please don't ask me my thoughts on the verdict because I don't know about innocence or guilt. CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story misspelled Catrice Sneed's first name. The Observer regrets the mistake. Peter DeCandia teaches Geometry and Progress Through Individual Determination at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore, Maryland, Maryland.

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