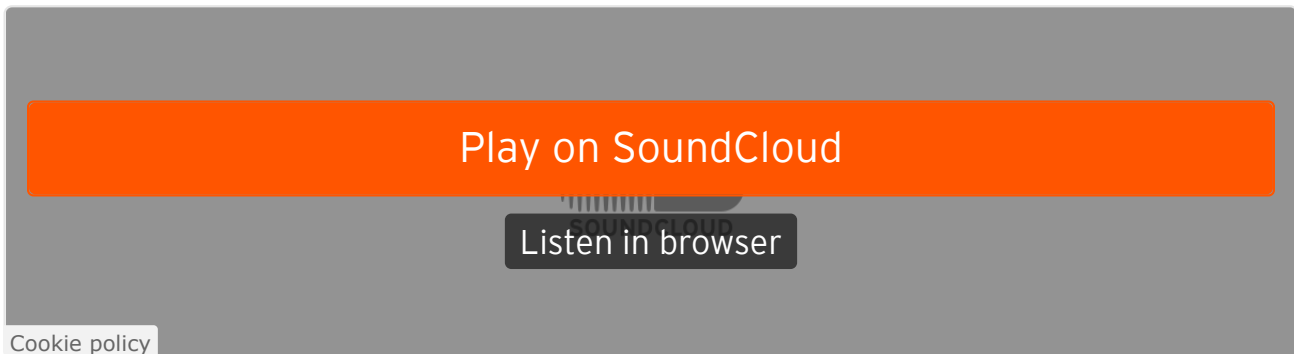


# A Louisville Family Reported Sexual Abuse By A Coach. He Worked With Kids For 15 More Years

[R.G. Dunlop](#)



As a high school sophomore, Eric Flynn was spiraling.

The once-stellar student was placed in less challenging classes. The gifted athlete dropped out of sports he loved. The teenager, once reserved, now punched holes in doors and threatened suicide.

He wouldn't say why. Perplexed, his parents sought help from their son's mentor. Drew Conliffe was quick to respond.

Sure, he'd take Eric out for a nice dinner and see what he could learn about the root of his torment. Anything to help.

Drew Conliffe, pictured in 2015.

At the time, Kathy Flynn thought that was a great idea. After all, everybody loved Conliffe: a basketball coach at Trinity High School, a leader in

Kentucky's junior golf world and a friend of the Flynn family.

Today, Kathy Flynn is overwhelmed with guilt.

"I feel like I sacrificed my son," she said.

That's because in August 2003, when he was 17 years old, Eric Flynn confided to his parents that Conliffe had sexually abused him dozens of times over a period of at least two years.

But Conliffe apparently escaped serious consequences, an investigation by the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting shows. Indeed, he continued to work with children, leading a tour for youth golfers until this year even though dozens of people and several Louisville institutions knew about the allegation.

Kathy Flynn and her husband Bob Flynn took their son to police. Eventually, Trinity High School, the Archdiocese of Louisville and state officials knew. Even professionals at area golf courses where Conliffe was well-known likely had a clue, after an incident that left the Flynn's believing their son wasn't the only victim.

"I've been completely screwed up for the past 15 years," Eric Flynn said. "I've just been a total train wreck."

Drew Conliffe, 51, refused to discuss the allegation. He abruptly ended a telephone call after telling a reporter that the matter was "just none of your business."

If the police thoroughly investigated Conliffe, there's no evidence of it. And after Eric Flynn's parents confronted Conliffe in late 2003, he

dismissed the allegation as a misunderstanding.

But soon after, Conliffe and his father — a former elected official — started writing checks.

Over the next decade, the Flynns received at least \$73,000 from the Conliffes to cover Eric Flynn's therapy, medical expenses and college tuition, records obtained by KyCIR show.

Mike Conliffe told KyCIR that he and his son "may have" paid the Flynns — "just to make it go away." Conliffe, a Democrat who served as the elected Jefferson County attorney from 1986-1998, said his son is "doing fine."

"There've been no problems for years. I just don't understand why you're bringing it up."

## **Gifts, Attention, Then Abuse**

Eric Flynn in an undated childhood photo.

Flynn, now 32, clearly remembers watching University of Louisville

basketball from Drew Conliffe's lower level, mid-court seats at Freedom Hall. He remembers Conliffe picking him up, alone, in his silver Honda. And he remembers the cash, apparel and other gifts he'd take home.

Conliffe coached one freshman basketball team at Trinity, while Flynn played on the other. They got to know each other a couple of years earlier, in middle school leagues.

Conliffe strengthened those ties by taking Flynn to sporting events,

out to eat or to golf courses, where Flynn sometimes caddied for him.

"I think he picked me because I was super quiet and I was trusting and I wanted to be a good basketball player," Flynn said. "He was supposed to help me."

After taking him out to dinner, Flynn said, Conliffe might give him \$20 or \$40. For caddying, the amount was much more — several hundred dollars, far above the going rate.

Flynn's family had less money than many of his classmates at the all-boys Catholic school in St. Matthews, and the gifts and attention made him feel more like their equal.

When he was about 16, Flynn remembers a drawer in his bedroom full of cash he'd been given by Conliffe.

"Thousands of dollars," Flynn said. "I even bought my girlfriend a real diamond necklace."

Child-abuse experts define "grooming" as winning the trust of children and their parents, often with gifts and attention; gaining access to the children alone; and, finally, initiating sexual contact.

Jodi Klein, a licensed clinical social worker in Louisville who counseled Flynn off and on for years, said Conliffe's gifts, attention and friendship with Flynn's parents could all be described as classic grooming.

Once the games, the dinners and the golf were over, Flynn said Conliffe would claim he had some paperwork to do. The next stop often was at Conliffe's home or office.

"I think I got to where I knew what was gonna happen, and I just wanted to get it over with," Flynn said.

He remembers it this way:

Conliffe would pin him down, unbutton his own pants and rub his penis on Flynn's leg. Every time, Flynn's memory blacks out at this same stage; Klein has suggested that's a coping mechanism. Flynn has tried to retrieve the missing memories with the help of therapy, but nothing has worked.

Klein said his emotional pain is substantial.

Klein diagnosed Flynn with post-traumatic stress syndrome. She said he has had social anxiety and relationship issues, educational difficulties and severe mood disturbances. He's had extreme anger, panic attacks and depression.

"He has struggled mightily," Klein said.

Drew Conliffe, pictured at right, with the junior varsity basketball team in 2003. Eric Flynn quit basketball before the season began.

KyCIR interviewed more than 50 people for this story. Only Eric Flynn was willing to talk publicly about a specific allegation of sexual abuse involving Drew Conliffe. But one parent said his son escaped when Conliffe attempted to pin him to the floor in the coach's apartment.

And five other people Conliffe coached in middle school or high school told KyCIR that during basketball practice, they saw him touch players in ways they thought were inappropriate.

Ryan Kennedy, a friend of Flynn's since childhood, played basketball for Conliffe in middle school. Kennedy remembers Conliffe getting too close for comfort, his bottom half leaning against him, or his nose touching Kennedy's.

"There were times when I would literally push him off me," Kennedy said.

He didn't think much of it, at the time. But during a 2003 high school spring break trip — Conliffe was vacationing in Destin, Florida, along with lots of Trinity families — Kennedy and Flynn encountered him in an elevator.

Flynn "just completely lost it," said Kennedy, now a barber in Fern Creek. "[He] started cussin' at him, said 'f-k you, Drew, get away from me.'"

Flynn called Conliffe a gay slur. Kennedy grabbed Flynn, and pushed him against the wall.

"I was like, 'Dude, you can't talk to coach like that.'"

Kennedy didn't understand until months later, when Flynn told him that Conliffe had sexually abused him in his hotel room during the trip.

The father of another student coached by Conliffe said he believes Conliffe tried to sexually assault his son. He requested anonymity, because his son does not want to be publicly identified.

He said his son recounted a scenario that closely mirrors what Flynn describes: he went to Conliffe's apartment to help move some

furniture, and Conliffe attempted to pin him down behind the couch. His son said he got away.

Later, the father saw Conliffe at a U of L basketball game.

"I had visions of giving him a knuckle sandwich as we walked out of the place," he said.

## **After Police Drop Case, Conliffes Start To Pay**

On a Sunday afternoon in August 2003, when Eric Flynn was 17, his parents finally learned the truth.

Drew Conliffe had called the Flynns' house and left a message for Eric. When Kathy Flynn found out that he hadn't returned the call, she told her son she'd punish him if he didn't practice better manners.

Eric's response: "You're going to ground me? I don't care if I ever see or talk to that son of a bitch again."

He ran upstairs. She found him curled into a ball, shaking.

"I said, 'Oh my God, Eric, what has he done?' He wouldn't quit crying."

The Flynns went the next month to the Louisville Metro Police Department.

Records show that Eric Flynn told a police detective, a prosecutor and a child-abuse interviewer that the abuse began several years earlier.

Flynn said that "his coach, Drew Conliffe," had rubbed his penis on Flynn's bare feet, and clothed leg, on more than one occasion.

According to Kathy Flynn, police told her that another alleged victim, and Conliffe, were interviewed. Then the case was closed.

The Flynns say they were told there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute.

Anne Haynie, the assistant commonwealth's attorney who sat in on Eric Flynn's interview, told KyCIR she doesn't remember Flynn's case, or why it wasn't prosecuted.

Frustrated with the superficial Louisville police investigation, Kathy and Bob Flynn wanted to confront Drew Conliffe themselves.

They said Conliffe agreed to meet with them in a room at the Big Spring Country Club, where the Conliffes were members.

"I thought you were a friend. I trusted you," Kathy Flynn remembers saying to Drew Conliffe. "How could you do this to my son?"

Conliffe denied wrongdoing. He said Eric must have misunderstood innocent wrestling and horseplay for something evil, the Flynns recall.

"Then Bob pretty much cussed him out," Kathy Flynn said.


Eric Flynn was going to therapy twice a week, at \$90 per session. His father was in the process of retiring on disability from GE Corporate. Kathy Flynn is an insurance agent. The family was struggling to afford Eric's therapy.

So they turned to Mike Conliffe.

They told the former county

Then-Jefferson County attorney Mike Conliffe



attorney that his son needed to  pictured in 1997. take some financial responsibility for the damage he'd caused.

The checks began to flow.

Payments came at first from Drew Conliffe, and then from his father, according to copies of the checks and written agreements provided by the Flynns to KyCIR.

In the first few years, Drew Conliffe paid \$10,000 to cover Eric's medical bills. Later, as Eric Flynn struggled to get through college, Drew and Mike Conliffe paid nearly \$33,000 for his expenses and student loans.

In a brief phone interview, Mike Conliffe, now 80, refused to discuss details of the payments to the Flynns.

"It's been a long time ago and I'm an old man now," Conliffe said.

Kathy Flynn initially thought the Conliffes agreed to pay because they felt guilty, and wanted to help.

"I was naive, I guess," she said.

Now, she believes they did not want anything to come out.

In 2014, the Conliffes offered a final settlement, which stipulated that it would remain "forever strictly confidential."

Eric Flynn and his parents signed the agreement in May 2014. It referred to "a personal injury that occurred between 2001 and 2003 in the nature of a claim for sexual battery asserted by Eric S. Flynn."

The document also stated that the Conliffes “expressly deny liability.”

Mike Conliffe issued the final check, for \$30,000.

Final check from the Conliffes to the Flynns

The agreement says nothing about the potential consequences of violating confidentiality. Eric Flynn and his parents aren’t worried about doing so.

“It’s not right what’s been going on, and I finally felt I should do something about it,” he said.

Eric Flynn, a new father, has thought a lot about other kids Conliffe might have coached after him, and whether he may have molested some of them too.

## **Lots Of People Knew. Nothing Happened**

In the past 15 years, dozens of people and several institutions knew Drew Conliffe had been accused of sexual abuse.

Many declined KyCIR’s requests for interviews.

After they started talking openly about the allegation, the Flynns assumed Trinity parted ways with Conliffe. They were shocked in early 2007 to see Conliffe sitting at the scorer’s table at a Trinity basketball game.

Bob Flynn, hyperventilating, leaned into Conliffe’s ear.

“You’d better get your ass out of here right now,” Bob Flynn said he

told Conliffe. "[My sons] should never have to see you."

Kathy and Bob Flynn went to see Trinity President Rob Mullen. They said they told him Conliffe had sexually abused Eric, who had since graduated.

In an interview with KyCIR, Mullen said he recalled the Flynns were "beside themselves" during that February 2007 meeting. He was stunned.

"They were genuinely distraught," Mullen said.

But Mullen, who is still Trinity's president, contradicted the Flynns' account of why they were distraught. He told KyCIR that he didn't remember them specifying sexual abuse. Instead, he described it as an "abuse-type complaint."

Mullen said Conliffe no longer coached at Trinity by the time he met with the Flynns, although he doesn't recall why. But Mullen said he nonetheless told Conliffe following the Flynns' visit that he needed to "step away from" the school.

Mullen said he brought the Flynns' concerns to the police, the Archdiocese of Louisville and the state Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Archdiocese spokesperson Cecelia H. Price said in an emailed statement that church officials didn't receive enough information to act on.

If they had, and deemed it credible, Price said, they would have told

Trinity families and the broader community.

According to Mullen, the police and the Cabinet for Health and Family Services told him there was nothing they could do with the information he provided.

Eric Flynn, by then an adult, would have to file a complaint himself.

## **In Junior Golf World, Allegations But No Action**

In early 2008, an anonymous flyer with a salacious allegation was distributed around area golf courses.

“Drew Conliffe is a child molester,” the flyer read. “With a history of child molestation, should you be putting young men at risk at your facility!!!”

The Flynns said they had nothing to do with the flyer. But it left them thinking their son wasn’t alone.

Kathy Flynn’s brother, Paul Gruner, got a copy of it and the response letter that followed.

The letter, signed by Conliffe, referred to “some information you received recently concerning my character.”

It described the allegation as “horrible,” and “not true.”

A portion of Conliffe’s letter, dated April 1, 2008

“I have worked with young people for over 20 years in junior golf and have never at any time had the first problem,” the letter said. “I believe

that record speaks for itself."

Gruner said he was a member of Midland Trail Golf Club and got the flyer and letter from its director of golf, Pat Barry. Gruner said he made his nephew's allegation crystal clear to Barry: Conliffe had molested him.

Gruner told KyCIR that Barry thanked him, and added that he would keep that in mind.

KyCIR reached Barry three times by phone. Twice, he said he was too busy to talk. The third time, Barry hung up immediately when a reporter identified himself.

As recently as this year, leaders in Kentucky's junior golf world were praising Conliffe publicly.

For more than two decades, he served as executive director of the Kentucky Junior Golf Foundation. In the foundation's most recent business filings, all the officers are members of the Conliffe family.

The foundation's junior golf tour merged with another one at the beginning of 2018.

At the time of the merger, Chester Musselman, president of Musselman Hotels, praised Conliffe in a press release, saying "how important Drew Conliffe has been these past 24 years for so many junior golfers in this state."

In [that press release](#), and [on his company's website](#), Musselman is identified as president of the foundation Conliffe ran. But Musselman

disputed that when KyCIR asked about allegations against Conliffe.

Musselman denied being the foundation's president before acknowledging he did have a leadership role in it.

"I did not have the books," he said. "I didn't control it."

Musselman also said he had "no idea" about alleged improprieties involving Conliffe.

"I've never heard that. That's very surprising," Musselman said.

Chris Redle of Golf House Kentucky, which runs the merged junior tour, said he too had no knowledge of alleged improprieties by Conliffe.

After the merger, officials associated with the new tour — the [Kentucky PGA Junior Tour presented by Musselman-Kirchdorfer](#) — said Conliffe's job essentially dissolved.

## **15 Years Later, Another Attempt At Justice**

Eric Flynn says the abuse is still upending his life.

He's prone to angry tirades. He drinks too much. He calls himself a "monster."

Last October, he got drunk at a friend's wedding after reminiscing with high school buddies brought memories of Drew Conliffe flooding back. He rolled his car, and ended up with a DUI conviction.

"I was just thinking about it (the abuse) after that and was like, 'what

am I doing?" Flynn said. "I'm still just a total wreck, this is still just ruining my life... I finally felt I should do something about it."

A few months later, Flynn decided to return to Louisville Metro Police. He asked them, again, to investigate.

There, Detective Stacey Roby of the Crimes Against Children Unit seemed receptive to his story.

"This is a sexual assault," Roby told Flynn near the end of a three-hour recorded interview, a copy of which Flynn obtained from police and provided to KyCIR.

Roby reviewed copies of the checks Eric Flynn brought her to document the payments his family had received from the Conliffes.

"It makes no sense to me that someone would pay you thousands and thousands of dollars just because you went to his apartment," Roby said.

The detective suggested a plan: they'd call Conliffe on a recorded line. Roby told Flynn that such a call could elicit a confession — or at least closure, "to be able to confront the man that did this to you."

Flynn agreed during that April 11 interview to make the call. But it never happened.

There's no indication in police records that Roby ever interviewed anyone other than Flynn. A representative of LMPD refused to make Roby available for comment.

But the case file details Roby's next steps. She obtained some records

from Family & Children's Place, where Eric Flynn was interviewed in 2003. She also went looking for the police department's own file on the 2003 case.

The next thing Eric Flynn heard from police was in late June. In a phone call, Roby broke the news that the prosecutor wasn't going to bring charges.

Notation from case file

Flynn had told Roby that Conliffe pinned him to the ground on numerous occasions. But the prosecutor concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove Conliffe had subjected Flynn to sexual contact by "force," a necessary element of the felony sexual abuse law.

Roby's notes show that Eric Flynn was upset.

"I'm not quitting on this," Flynn told Roby. "I can tell you, that's my life mission now."

Flynn got a copy of his records from LMPD in September. The 85-page case file largely consisted of Flynn's own paperwork.

There was almost nothing from the 2003 police investigation.

That file was missing.

Notation from Detective Stacey Roby's case file

The only documents left from the first police investigation were an incident report and a summary of Eric Flynn's interview with the family



services agency.

Roby's 2018 case summary noted the missing file without elaboration. Jessie Halladay, an LMPD spokesperson, said she can't speculate about what happened to the file, but that there are "several possible explanations."

Halladay said that none of the department's current staff are familiar with the 2003 case. However, John Shifflett, the detective assigned to the case in 2003, is still with LMPD.

Halladay refused to make Shifflett available for an interview. And Shifflett would not answer the door at his home when a reporter knocked in early October.

"I think the system's a joke," Eric Flynn said.

## **The Lasting Impact**

Kyle Flynn, Eric's 30-year-old brother, says he believes there are other victims. And he despises Drew Conliffe.

"I wish I could beat him to a pulp," Kyle Flynn said.

During a chance encounter at the Seneca Golf Course last year, he exchanged angry words with Drew Conliffe.

Kyle Flynn said he threatened Conliffe with a golf club before two other men intervened.

He has been trying for years to help his brother find peace — and to ferret out others with similar stories about Conliffe. He's frustrated that

no one else has come forward.

"I just know how many other families are completely f---d up like ours," Kyle Flynn said.

Bob and Kathy Flynn said they blame themselves for the impact on their family.

"I was supposed to protect my kids. And I didn't do it," Bob Flynn said. "I'd take every bit of [Eric's] pain if I could."

Eric Flynn and his family remain wracked with guilt. Even after all the attempts they've made to hold Conliffe accountable, it feels as if nothing happened.

Conliffe kept working with kids.

Eric Flynn still thinks he could have — should have — done more.

"It's eaten at me forever."

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