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Judge awards \$2.5 million to former RISD student raped on a term abroad

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PROVIDENCE — A federal judge has awarded \$2.5 million to a former Rhode Island School of Design student who was raped while studying abroad in Ireland during the summer of 2016.

U.S. District Court Chief Judge John J. McConnell Jr. ruled Tuesday that RISD failed to provide safe and secure housing that would have allowed the former student to lock her bedroom door and prevent the perpetrator from gaining access to her room. McConnell found that the school had breached its duty of care by failing to ensure that the students had keys to their rooms and that its negligence led to the attack in June 2016.

According to the 17-page verdict, the woman, identified only as Jane Doe, attended a three-week art program in Ireland along with other students and a teaching assistant in 2016. At the time, she was earning a joint degree from RISD and Brown University.

The school arranged housing with the Burren College of Art at the Burren Atlantic Hotel and Holiday Village. The students were assigned to four-bedroom houses. While the houses could be locked from the outside, the students were not provided keys to their bedrooms.

The students went out for a celebratory drink the night of their arrival, June 18. Jane and her eventual assailant, whom the ruling does not identify, walked back to the house from the pub. He asked her for a kiss goodnight. She said she would give him one on the cheek and said no when he asked for another. She showed him to the door.

She closed her door but realized she could not lock it. Later that night she awoke to find the perpetrator atop her smelling of vomit and alcohol and her clothes removed. He raped her, a violation that made her recall “feeling really, profoundly sad.”

She reported the incident to the teaching assistant the next day. He arranged for medical care and, by the end of the week, the perpetrator had been dismissed from the Ireland program and ordered to leave. After an investigation and disciplinary hearing, it was determined that the perpetrator had violated RISD’s code on sexual misconduct.

According to the ruling, three years earlier, a student in Rome had been sexually assaulted, putting school officials on notice about the critical importance of enabling students to lock bedroom doors in mixed-gender housing.

In the aftermath, Jane has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, fear, depression and other negative emotions. She has had trouble having physical contact with men, including her brother and father.

While Jane has gone on to earn her dual degree and remains an accomplished scholar and artist, McConnell found after hearing testimony at a bench trial that she suffered permanent damage, with symptoms that may never subside.

Jaime Marland, a spokesperson for RISD, said the school is disappointed by the findings but could not comment on the case itself due to confidentiality.

"RISD is deeply committed to providing a safe and supportive environment for our students," Marland said.

RISD has established an International Incident Response Team that works both proactively and reactively to keep community members safe during international travel, Marland said. In 2018, the school assembled a Sexual Misconduct and Safety Task Force to enhance its review of and response to sexual misconduct on and off campus, Marland said. As a result of the task force's work, RISD created a standing Title IX Oversight Committee consisting of faculty, staff and students charged with implementing the recommendations.

"We take allegations of sexual misconduct by or against our students very seriously, and we are dedicated to providing thorough, prompt and equitable responses to such allegations when brought forward," Marland said.

