

# 'We've got to get this solved': Paterno family takes key role in sex abuse prevention effort

April 10, 2015 12:00 AM

By Karen Langley / Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG — On the last night that longtime Penn State University football coach Joe Paterno spent at home, his family says, he scrawled a note.

Mr. Paterno's wife, Sue, and son Scott recounted his message Thursday, when they appeared at the headquarters of the State System of Higher Education for a report on a two-year pilot, funded by Mrs. Paterno, of a program that trains adults to prevent child sexual abuse.

"When I saw the message, I knew that this was his signal to us," Mrs. Paterno told a room of reporters.

"In essence, and I'm paraphrasing, it was perhaps the best part about this scandal is that it has raised awareness of sexual abuse."

Joe Paterno died in January 2012, less than three months after his former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky was accused of sexually assaulting young boys. That June, Sandusky was found guilty on 45 counts. He was later sentenced to serve at least 30 years in prison.

Later, Scott Paterno came across an organization that works to prevent the sexual abuse of children by educating adults. The organization Stop It Now! had been testing a new program, Circles of Safety, said Deborah Donovan Rice, the program director.

The group had performed early tests. After the Paterno family became involved, it was decided that the program would be tried in the Pennsylvania state universities.

"They wanted to do something specifically for higher ed and around preventing child sexual abuse," Ms. Rice said.

“It just happened to be very timely that we had this program that was well on its way to being developed and could be customized.”

Circles of Safety for Higher Education trains adults to act to prevent child sexual abuse from happening. Through two-day sessions, it trains “prevention squads” that then lead efforts on their campuses to encourage the prevention of abuse.

Nearly 150 people from the 14 state-owned universities and system administration were trained at sessions throughout the state.

Participants learn signs warning of potential abuse. They spend time on the topic of boundaries, engaging in an exercise in which they are given examples and must discuss whether something is harmful and what action would be needed in that scenario, Ms. Rice said.

The program was evaluated by the Prevention Innovations Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, she said.

Sue Paterno funded nearly all of the \$220,000 cost of the pilot program, her representative said.

The Paternos and Ms. Rice said they would like to see the program spread to other campuses.

At the conclusion of a report on the program, Mrs. Paterno addressed the State System board.

“We’ve got to get this solved,” she said. “We can’t prevent them all, but we have to make a concerted effort to try.”