

B.C. teacher 'addicted' to sex

I really thought I was doing good,' former educator says of sexual encounters with teen students

BY ROD MICKLEBURGH, VANCOUVER

The more Tom Ellison had sex with his teenaged female students, the more he loved it. He became hooked, the former Prince of Wales high-school teacher acknowledged yesterday.

Mr. Ellison was testifying in his own defence on 16 sex-related charges involving a dozen former students at the school, located in an affluent area of Vancouver that is home to many of the city's elite professionals.

While trying to rationalize his actions, the popular, good-looking teacher said that he became "much like an alcoholic hiding his bottles."

As an overflow courtroom listened in rapt silence, he said: "If I was addicted to anything, I was addicted to the romance. It was just so romantic. When I was with the women, I loved it."

During a full day of graphic, often blunt, admissions, Mr. Ellison said that he thought at the time that he was probably doing the girls a favour by "teaching them sex the right way. . . . I was as gentle as I could be."

"In most cases . . . I was much more giving than I got [back] . . . I really thought I was doing good."

Mr. Ellison also admitted to having sexual trysts with six other Grade 11 and Grade 12 students who are not part of the current case.

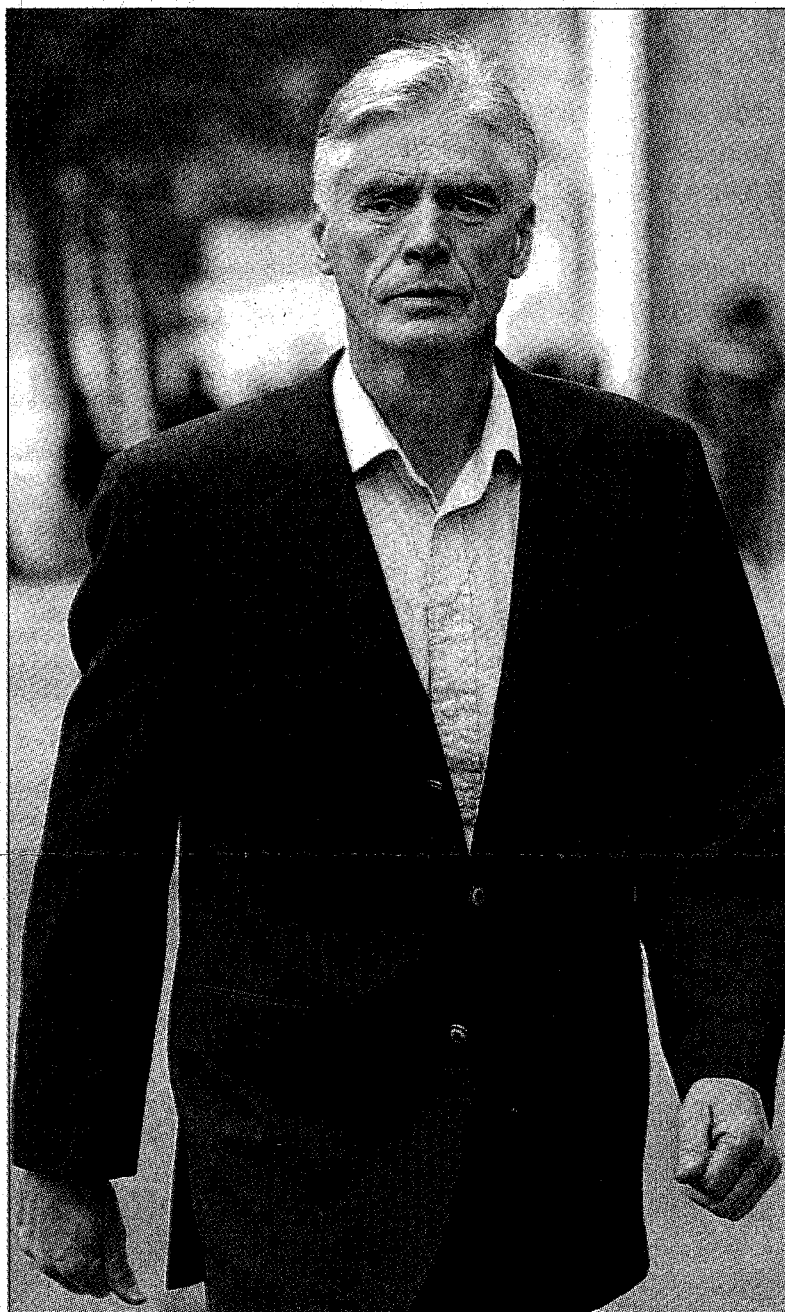
The encounters took place during the 1970s and early 1980s while Mr. Ellison was a teacher with the popular outdoor adventure program at the school known as Quest.

Most occurred on his live-aboard sailboat or during summer sailing expeditions to the Queen Charlotte Islands.

"I was totally enamoured by the romance of it all," he said of his liaisons with students who were mostly 16 and 17 at the time, with little previous sexual experience. "Looking back, I was as wrong as you could be as a teacher. There's no doubt about that."

But at the time, Mr. Ellison, now 62, said that he believed the students loved it, too.

"I always knew in my heart that I was with a student who wanted to be there. The only way I could live with myself for the past 25 years was that I always had enough feedback [from them] . . . that it was reciprocal."



CHUCK STOODY/CP

Former teacher Tom Ellison, shown on his way to Vancouver Provincial Court yesterday, testified that he was 'enamoured by the romance' of his sexual encounters with students during the 1970s and 80s.

He felt, then, that no one was harmed by the teacher-student encounters. "I never thought I would be hurting people if we had sex. . . . I thought it was the best thing I ever did, the cleanest thing I ever did."

Mr. Ellison said he did not come to terms with the fact his sexual encounters might have damaged his partners until two of them angrily confronted their former teacher in the early 1990s.

He agreed that, morally, his actions were totally wrong, and designed to satisfy himself sexually. "I was just being so stupid and unprofessional. . . . I was living a life of lies."

As he finished answering questions from his lawyer, Bill Smart, Mr. Ellison turned to the public gallery and apologized.

"I always thought it was a great thing for both of us. That just doesn't work for me any more. . . . I just apologize to you guys, because

you were good friends," he said, with a barely discernible catch in his voice.

Earlier, Mr. Ellison said that he had sex with one of his students for the first time in 1975, when he would have been 32. "I crossed the line. I knew it was wrong. I just enjoyed being with her so much," he told the court.

Although he had a girlfriend at the time — "a very beautiful lady" — the former teacher said he had had "wonderful contact" with the unnamed Grade 11 student "and this one time, I just gave in."

The two went on to have a two-year relationship, he said. The woman is not one of the 12 complainants against Mr. Ellison.

He said he had never thought about being with a student when he began teaching, "and then this wonderful person came into my life."

He gave his version of several

sexual encounters with former students who testified against him during the gripping two-week trial.

The most graphic involved a former student who testified last week behind closed doors. Mr. Ellison denied her evidence that she tearfully resisted his advances.

He recalled how, after some nude sunbathing and a foot massage while they were alone on his sailboat, she emerged from the ship's shower "and she looked beautiful."

"There was no doubt she was a very pretty woman. She was smiling and very warm. She had a beautiful smile," he said of the 16-year-old.

She agreed to let him brush her hair, he continued.

"It was very sensual. It was a good feeling and I was definitely aroused. I said she was beautiful and she was."

Later, he said, the student agreed to share his bed. "I never thought it was wrong, other than she was a student."

It took an hour of oral sex for her to have an orgasm, Mr. Ellison said.

"It was the longest I ever made love to anyone. I was as giving as I could be. I really tried for her to have a great time. . . . She came. That's what always made me feel okay about it. She thanked me."

The student testified that she asked Mr. Ellison a number of times to stop and did not have an orgasm.

Concerning another student who testified that Mr. Ellison removed her underwear so she could be nude along with the other students during a summer sailing trip, he explained that he felt it was "positive for her. She was very relaxed after that."

Mr. Ellison described the student as "not very good-looking and a little overweight from a different ethnic background."

He said she tended to be shy around the other female students "who were more relaxed about nudity and very good-looking."

Many of the complainants described how their encounters with Mr. Ellison would begin with back rubs, then proceed to breast massages, digital penetration and often oral sex. There was never sexual intercourse with the women while they were students.

"I loved the fact of romance. It was my fault," he testified. "I enjoyed a new person, a new personality. My fault. I enjoyed giving. That was my biggest fault." All trysts were consensual, he declared many times, noting that he also had many sexual partners who were not students.

"I don't recall ever having to convince the women I've been with."

Prosecutor Ralph Keefer then asked him: "These are girls, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are," Mr. Ellison replied.

The trial continues today.

COMMENT

Ex-teacher was 'addicted to romance'

Ellison testifies
that having sex
with students was
common in 1970s



BRIAN HUTCHINSON
in Vancouver

Tom Ellison long believed that having sex with his adolescent high school students was a positive experience for everyone involved. It was "a great thing," he testified yesterday at his trial in B.C. provincial court. "A wonderful thing."

Mr. Ellison made the remarks to his defence lawyer; he was attempting to explain how he once rationalized his outrageous and allegedly criminal behaviour with female students.

The courtroom fell completely silent. Mr. Ellison looked down. And then he began to cry.

Now 62, grey of hair and gaunt, the former science and physical education teacher is accused of indecent assaults and gross indecencies, all of them alleged to have taken place from 1972 to 1983, when he worked at Prince of Wales Secondary in Vancouver.

For much of that time, he led a vigorous outdoor program unique to the school. Most of the 12 female complainants in the Crown's case were involved with the program. They have testified that Mr. Ellison had sex with them on his sailboat, which he kept at a Vancouver marina.

He admits to dozens of sexual encounters with female students. His legal team argues that Mr. Ellison's behaviour was wrong, but not illegal at the time.

Mr. Ellison has spent the last day and a half on the witness stand, explaining at times how a "straight" and "uptight" square as himself became obsessed with teenage girls and their sexual conquest, and how it led to hush-hush after-school sessions with those whom he selected.

"If I was addicted to anything, I was addicted to the romance of it," he told defence lawyer Bill Smart.

It was nothing special, he added. In the 1970s, sleeping around "was more normal than abnormal.... There were lots of teachers at my school having affairs with their students."

Mr. Ellison testified that he first had "sexual contact" with a Prince of Wales student in 1975, three years after obtaining his teaching certificate. The student, who is not a complainant at this trial, was willing and, apparently, quite able.

"I had a lot of contact with her," Mr. Ellison recalled. "It was wonderful contact."

He knew then that he had "just crossed the line." But he did not consider the behaviour to be immoral, and he certainly didn't stop.

"I knew I was taking a risk," he testified. "But I never felt bad about myself.... I thought I was helping people. I had no idea anybody would be hurt."

In retrospect, he knows that what he did was awful. "I'm here today to own up to what I did. I can't even believe that I was that stupid."

Remorseful? Self-serving? What are we to make of this man? Mr. Ellison seems to believe he was a born teacher, a natural. Teaching made him feel alive, ecstatic. "It was the most altruistic thing I could ever do in my life," he said in court yesterday.

In the next breath, he described how he seduced students.

Some of his private sessions with students were marathons of endurance that lasted for hours. Some involved a vibrator; breast massages and oral sex, almost always; occasionally, intercourse. None of the girls objected, he said.

Years later, as women, some did. Authorities were first notified in 1987. The Crown considered laying charges but none came until 2004. Then more women came forward and lodged complaints.

Most of Mr. Ellison's memories seem consistent with those of the women who have testified against him; however, he insists he did not engage in any sexual behaviour with one of them, who by court order can't be identified.

He also took issue with another complainant. She testified last week that Mr. Ellison had made her cry while attempting to persuade her to have sex on his sailboat, and that she had asked him to stop his advances.

He insisted that the woman, then just a teenager, did not say "no," and that she did not seem upset at the time. He brushed her hair, he recalled. She was beautiful, he said. They had oral sex that lasted for close to an hour.

"It was the longest time I'd ever made love to a person," he added. "I really tried for her to really have a great time.... She worked really hard, and she finally had an orgasm."

He did not attempt to have intercourse with the girl. "That wasn't who I was," he told his defence lawyer.

Indeed, said Mr. Ellison, he was a bit of a prude when he first arrived at Prince of Wales, in the mid-1970s. A former forester and self-professed jock, he was shocked in 1977 when some girls paraded around in their skimpy bikinis while on a summer sailing trip.

"It just seemed out of place," he testified. "[It] was not what I wanted to be doing on the trips."

Skinny-dipping was foreign to him, too.

"I was new to the nude game," Mr. Ellison said. Soon, nude dips in the water with students were de rigueur. And "sex-making" became frequent. He gave girls hand signals during gym class to indicate when he wanted to meet afterwards.

It was not until later, much later, that he managed any regret for what had happened with all those girls, over all those years. He came to recognize what he had done and who he had become.

"I was living a life of lies," he told Crown prosecutor Ralph Keefer, as the day wore on and cross-examination commenced. "[I] was probably much like an alcoholic hiding bottles.... I was just hiding bottles.... I never thought that I'd get caught."

"But many [students] were harmed," Mr. Keefer interjected.

"It seems that way," shrugged the defendant.

The trial continues.

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