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PISTONS

Accuser in Detroit Pistons sex scandal breaks silence: Rob Murphy harassed and assaulted me



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For more than a year, DeJanai Raska kept quiet about the powerful man she says used his position to turn her into his sexual target: fired Detroit Pistons executive Rob Murphy, a beloved hometown figure revered for turning his hardscrabble background into a success story in the world of professional basketball.

But behind closed doors, Raska says, this celebrated Detroiter who rose to assistant general manager of the Pistons, sexually harassed her for months while she was his executive assistant. She said he groped her private parts in front of her 4-year-old daughter, grabbed her buttocks multiple times, subjected her to unwanted kissing, often told her she aroused him and said he wanted to "put a baby in her."

Murphy also tried to force her to have sex, she says, but she managed to push him off of her as he held her down on a bed.

Pistons fire Murphy following 6-month suspension

"It felt like I had a dangerous secret. I felt like if the wrong person found out, I could be fired," Raska said in a recent interview with the Free Press, in which she outlined allegations in the lawsuit. She said she lived with fear and anxiety for months, until she couldn't take it anymore.

"Silence is not an option," Raska said. "It's not for me. It shouldn't be for any woman ... This is my chance to voice the truth ... and to take my power back."

Raska's public disclosure comes six months after Murphy was placed on leave from the Pistons as the organization quietly investigated claims that he had engaged in workplace misconduct with a former female employee.

It would cost him his job.

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The Pistons announced Murphy's firing late Wednesday evening after being contacted by the Free Press, stating:

"Rob Murphy no longer works for the Detroit Pistons or Motor City Cruise, in any capacity. Mr. Murphy was recently terminated for violation of company policy and the terms of his employment agreement," the statement reads. "The facts that gave rise to his termination surfaced during a review, assisted by a national law firm, of allegations made by a former employee."

The former employee is Raska, who is doing more than talking.

On Thursday, the 32-year-old mother of two filed a sexual discrimination and harassment lawsuit against the Detroit Pistons and 50-year-old Murphy, alleging she was abused, harassed and assaulted by a man she trusted as a mentor.

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Raska, a lifelong Detroiter with a passion for basketball, grew up loving the Pistons and long dreamed of pursuing a career in professional basketball management. She believed Murphy could help her, and looked up to him, trusted him.

But Murphy, she said, had other plans when he convinced her to leave her career as a real estate agent and manager of amateur athletes and hip-hop artists to become his executive assistant in 2021. After taking the job, she said she quickly learned that Murphy only wanted her for sex, alleging he also belittled her constantly, telling her the Pistons staff didn't like her and often reminding her that she was in her role only because he put her there.

Her fears about speaking up

"I was isolated and manipulated. Rob made it feel like he was the only person there who had my back," Raska said. "He made statements ... that HR didn't want me there. Nobody wanted me there. That HR thought I was ghetto."

Given his rank and close ties to the HR department, Raska believed him. And given that she was a single mom with no clout, speaking up could cost her her job.

"My main concern and fear is that I would be fired — without a doubt, fired and silenced," Raska said, noting Murphy also made her feel "as if HR protected him."

"The tightness that I felt he had with HR and the higher-ups was enough for me to just feel like if I opened my mouth, if I said anything that I would become a problem," Raska said.

So she stayed silent, for as long as she could.

The Pistons stayed quiet, too, disclosing no details or updates about the case until announcing Murphy's firing late Wednesday. The Pistons said no further details will be provided because it's a personnel matter.

Murphy did not return calls for comment.

Pistons hoped 'Ms. Raska would go away'

According to Raska's legal team, the Pistons were made aware of her allegations last fall, when one of her lawyers called a team lawyer and reported the allegation.

Murphy was then placed on leave.

Soon after, Raska said she sat down with the Pistons' lawyers for two hours and detailed her allegations. According to her lawyers, the attorneys said she "appeared to be credible."

But nothing happened after that. The Pistons went silent for months. So Raska sued.

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"We came forward before filing a lawsuit with the goal of having the Pistons do the right thing," said attorney Megan Bonanni, one of Raska's lawyers.

"I think it's a shameful situation that it took the threat of a lawsuit for the Pistons to do what was appropriate after all of these months," Bonanni said, arguing that this is not a case of a "rogue employee," but an organization "that is corrupt."

"The organization condoned and approved and were complicit in what he did. And they were hoping that Ms. Raska would go away." Bonanni said, adding: "Ms. Raska deserved better."

How it all started

It was the summer of 2021 when a mutual friend introduced Raska to Murphy.

Raska, who was working in real estate and managing musicians and amateur basketball players, wanted to pitch one of her players to try out for the Motor City Cruise, the NBA minor league team based in Detroit. At the time, Murphy was president of that team, and player liaison for the Pistons.

Murphy called Raska and told her: "I looked at your Instagram. You sound very serious about basketball. You seem connected to the city. I'm looking for an executive assistant right now."

Murphy is locally renowned. A former basketball and football star at Detroit Mumford, he coached at Detroit Crockett and Central high schools before becoming an assistant coach in college, first at Kent State and then at Syracuse. He also was head coach at Eastern Michigan for 10 seasons (2011-21) and reached three postseasons.

Raska said in an interview that she initially wasn't interested in Murphy's job offer because she was happy and busy with her work, though Murphy invited her to the Pistons office to meet in person. Once there, he encouraged her to embrace the opportunity to work with the Pistons. He then invited her for a second interview and offered her the job.

She took it, as she long had a passion for the Pistons, and was interested in building a career in professional sports management.

However, she did not know the executive assistant position had already been filled. Murphy had bypassed the HR process and "forced HR to hire her outside its normal process," her lawsuit states.

'That stuff you did before was ghetto'

On Sept. 2, 2021, Raska began her job as executive assistant to Murphy. The duties she expected, though, were assigned to others, like helping with the Motor City Cruise, coordinating player drafts, booking travel arrangements and being available for marketing and promotional appearances. Murphy didn't allow Raska to do any of this. Rather, he only let her send him a summary of his schedule, perform discrete scheduling tasks, process reimbursements and attend a weekly internal meeting.

The only event he let her work on, she said, was a personal Christmas event for the Rob Murphy Foundation, for which he paid her \$1,000 out of foundation money.

Raska continually asked for more responsibilities, but the answer was always no, with Murphy belittling her with comments like, "You wouldn't get it," or "That stuff that you did before was ghetto (expletive)." Once, when she asked for "real" work, he walked her over to the employee who booked his trips and said, "DJay thinks she can do your job."

Raska soon felt isolated at work, that people didn't like her, just as Murphy had said. She recalled the first and only time she was reported to HR, when a female colleague complained about one of her business suits from her real estate days. **She called it a "mean-girl-esque" move, maintaining the suit was tasteful and conservative.**

Murphy also commented **on her clothing at work, allegedly telling her once:** "A lot of these white girls don't have those curves. You gotta watch what you wear. You can't be having that thing stick out."

He made me 'his nanny'

A few weeks into the job, Murphy asked Raska for a favor: Would she pick up his 14-year-old son from high school and drop him off at home? She agreed — and this soon became her main role. She began to spend nights at the Murphy household when Murphy was out of town for basketball events and didn't want his son home alone.

Raska also picked the boy up most days from school, drove him and his friends places, including to Pistons games, and became known as "the driver."

"To be called a driver by teenagers — it was heartbreaking," Raska said.

Yet she did it, paying for gas out of her own pocket while living check to check on her \$30,000-a-year Pistons salary. Twice, she said, Murphy gave her \$100 for gas, though her

chauffeur duties were supposed to be secret.

Raska did not know this until she was at a staff meeting one day and told a Pistons manager she had to leave early to pick up Murphy's son from school.

"I was cursed at," Raska recalled. "He said, 'You can't let people know this. It's a liability.' "

'This is gonna be all mine'

According to Raska, the first time Murphy sexually assaulted her was in November 2021. She was dropping his son off at his house and her 4-year-old daughter was with her.

"As she was leaving, Murphy grabbed (her) breast and said, 'This is gonna be all mine,'" the lawsuit states. "He moved his hand to her genitals and said, 'This is gonna be all mine too.'"

She said she pushed him and away and told him, "Rob, don't ever touch me like that."

She also expressed shock that he would do this in front of her daughter, then left the house immediately.

'Murphy's sexual harassment was episodic'

After the encounter in front of Murphy's house, Raska said she tried to stay professional, hoping he would leave her alone, given her objection. She remained on guard.

But the harassment continued, she said.

One day, as Raska rode with Murphy in his car to attend a Motor City Cruise game, Murphy turned to her and out of the blue asked her if she liked oral sex and if she wanted to perform it on him — though he used more vulgar terms.

She declined. He persisted, and then told her "he felt sorry for the men she had been in relationships with."

After the car ride, Murphy started grabbing her body at the office of the Pistons practice facility. Raska protested, telling him she wanted to keep their relationship "strictly business."

Murphy responded: "OK, I'm gonna back off. That's all you gotta say."

This scenario would play out over and over again, she said.

"Murphy's sexual harassment was episodic," the lawsuit states. "When Raska told him to stop, he would stop for a few weeks ... Raska felt hopeful that they could salvage a professional relationship. But then Murphy would return to harassing her again."

Raska: He attacked me in the middle of the night

It was 2 a.m. when Murphy returned home early from a player scouting trip in the fall of 2022. It was the first time he had shown up at night while Raska was babysitting his son.

The three chatted briefly, and Murphy told his son to go to bed. Then he went to his office and called Raska to follow him.

When she walked in the office, "Murphy grabbed (her) behind and kissed her on the mouth."

Raska went stiff and pulled away. Then Murphy said: "I wanna put a baby inside you. Do you wanna sneak to my room?"

"Raska was terrified," the lawsuit states, adding she stepped away and went to the guest room and locked the door.

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She had never spent the night before when Murphy was in the house. She woke up that next morning and left, leaving behind piles of donations she was helping organize for Murphy's personal charity event.

The next day, he texted her: "Where'd you go? My son said you just left. You left a mess around the house."

Raska went back to clean the house, but brought her sister along so she would not be alone.

Raska: He tried to force me to have sex

Two months later, Raska was again staying overnight with Murphy's son while his dad was out of town. She heard the garage door open in the middle of the night.

She thought someone was breaking into the house, but it was Murphy, home early from another scouting trip. The two chatted. She told him she was tired and went to her room to sleep.

The next morning, Murphy called his son and Raska into his room. He told his son he needed "to talk to DJay alone" and closed the door behind his son.

"He got in front of me and pushed me down on his bed," Raska recalled.

She went stiff and tried to pull away, but he was strong.

"I'm literally trying to push my body up because he's on top of me, and I'm like, 'Hey, Rob, I don't want to do this.'"

Then she lied to get him to stop. "I'm on my period," she told him.

But Murphy persisted, which got her so angry she mustered the strength to push him away.

He started pacing the floor and telling her, "Sex is sex. You think too much."

She put her head in hands. He kept talking. She thought to herself, "How do I get out of here? Do I shout?"

She stood up and left.

"I remember getting in my car and pulling away, and tears coming out of my eyes," Raska recalled.

The next day, Murphy acted like nothing happened.

Raska warns others at work about Murphy

After that night, Raska told Murphy she would not watch his son overnight again. In February 2022, she applied for another position with the Pistons, but, she said, didn't get it after Murphy found out.

She also warned three of her younger female colleagues and two other Pistons staffers about Murphy's behavior. According to her lawsuit, here are some of the sexually inappropriate acts to which she was subjected from October 2021 to May 2022:

On multiple occasions, while they were alone in his office, Murphy stood up from his desk and showed Raska that his penis was erect. He did this again when he dropped his son off at home. He would tell her that she had aroused him.

Murphy once proposed that Raska could travel with the team if she would sleep with him, but said "If you're not ready for that, you're not ready for travel."

In stairwells at work, Murphy would touch her and comment on her body. Other times at work, he would ask her to walk in front of her as if he was being polite, "then grab her behind and her legs."

One afternoon, while Raska was dropping off his son at home, Murphy telephoned a woman, placed the call on speaker and discussed having sex with her while Raska stood there. Murphy hung up, looked at her and said, "See, I can get this anywhere."

Raska would soon learn that Murphy had sexual relationships with other women at work, including a director, the lawsuit says.

Raska reaches breaking point

By April 2022, Raska was trying to make the best of her situation. Murphy still wouldn't give her meaningful work, but kept her at a desk all day, with nothing to do but drive his son home from school. That had become her full-time job — playing chauffeur to his son.

Meanwhile, the harassment continued.

That spring, she says, Murphy groped her when she gave him a ride to pick up his car from a car detail shop, grabbing her body and putting his hands on her behind as she approached the driver's side door. She pulled away.

At the end of April 2022, Murphy learned that Raska had broken up with her boyfriend and proposed they take a trip. She rejected his offer. She soon stopped coming into the office to avoid contact with Murphy. He tried to convince her to come back to work, but she refused.

Then came the big blowup in May 2022.

It involved Murphy's son needing a ride and Raska not being there due to miscommunication. Murphy called her "and started screaming and cussing," she said.

Raska told Murphy: "I can't do this anymore."

Murphy told her to take the rest of the week off. On May 10, 2022, Raska met with Murphy for the last time at work. She asked for something to do, he told her there was no sense for her to stick around. He then sent a bogus email to HR and said that Raska had resigned by choice.

Still, Murphy continued to reach out to her.

He started calling her and texting her nonstop — though she didn't respond until he texted her that he was planning to send the police to her house. So she texted him that she was OK. It was her last message.

On Aug. 2, 2022, Murphy texted her a link to a news article: "Rob Murphy now Pistons Assistant GM."

She did not respond. Instead, she got a lawyer, who contacted the Pistons and reported the harassment.

When Raska learned the Pistons put him on leave, she was elated.

"My heart dropped, honestly ... because i'm like, 'Wow, I'm being heard ... they are taking this seriously,' " Raska said.

But then months passed with no action. She felt deflated.

"I grew up in the city really looking up to the Pistons, the Bad Boys ... and to be treated this way is heartbreaking," Raska said.

She can't watch basketball, she said. It makes her anxious and depressed — but not defeated.

Murphy made her feel a lot of things, she said, but never "less than I was."

"Who I am was always there," she said. "My integrity, my dignity, my humanity — even though it was challenged ... was not compromised."

Tresa Baldas is an award-winning courts and legal issues reporter and was awarded the 2023 Wade H. McCree Award for the Advancement of Justice by the Michigan Press Association. Contact her at tbaldas@freepress.com