

THE TIMES

NEWS REVIEW

Louise Tickle | Sunday July 18, 2021

The Sunday Times

I discovered my partner was a paedophile. He took me to court 37 times to get my kids.

When a Facebook message revealed a horrific truth about the father of her children, it was just the start of Julia's nightmare.



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Julia and Robert had been together for nearly six years. They were living in a nice flat in West Hampstead, north London, and had two young children together. Then Julia discovered that Robert was a convicted paedophile. She was on maternity leave in 2011, tapping away at her laptop in her kitchen, when a Facebook message pinged in. It was from a woman claiming to have been a family friend of Robert (not his real name).

"She said she was the mother of two little girls that he had sexually abused and subsequently served time in prison for abusing," Julia says. "I literally jumped." She recalls feeling "very confused, scared and in shock".

When she confronted him, Robert was "blasé" about it. "He said, 'Oh yeah, she's friends with my ex-wife. Don't listen to her, she's one of the people who launched a hate campaign against me'."

Julia was not young or naive. She was a high-flier in her early thirties, the acting director of a national think tank. There was an eight-year age difference between her and Robert, and she smiles wryly as she recalls why she fell for him.

"He's highly intelligent, he was older than the rest of my friendship group, and I think that was why I didn't notice the gap in his life story. He was doing his second degree and I felt sorry for him battling to get contact with his children against his 'nasty' ex-wife. He seemed like such an amazing person: he spoke several languages, had run health clinics abroad, he had all this life experience, and he's a really handsome guy, charismatic and attractive. Plus, I met him through friends."

After the Facebook message arrived, Robert's behaviour changed dramatically. He became unpleasant, aggressive and at times violent. "I became increasingly afraid of him, and of what this situation meant for all of us," Julia says. "I had no idea how to handle it."

The Facebook message had urged Julia to contact social services and the police, but at first, social services "completely brushed it off". It was only when she walked into Holborn police station and gave a statement that a proper database search was done. "The officer asked, 'Has he been known by any other names?' " She did know he had had a different surname, and told the officer what it was. "And his face just dropped. He said, 'There's a record against that name here; someone will be in touch'."

The next morning, social services called. Julia was told in no uncertain terms that Robert must never be left alone with the children. But she was still not told any detail of what he had done; letting her know would, apparently, infringe his data protection rights. To Julia's huge distress, her children were put on the child protection register.

Much later Julia discovered a third young girl had also been abused. The ages of the children Robert had committed sexual offences against were five, six and 14. After his conviction and time in prison, Robert had moved to London and completely reinvented himself.

Yet this revelation was just the start of Julia's trauma. When the truth came out, Robert didn't disappear from the scene. Despite his conviction, he has fought for the children to live with him on a 50:50 basis - including unsupervised overnight stays.

Over the course of eight exhausting years, he has forced Julia to attend 37 hearings in the family court - all unsuccessful. Julia is now 42. What she describes as the "dark, chaotic world" of the family justice system has cost her at least a quarter of a million pounds. She had to remortgage her house to meet ballooning legal fees, as well as borrow money from her parents. Robert, meanwhile, has had access to legal aid.

"From the moment the authorities got involved, the family court was Robert's only access to us, and God, he used it," she says. "He loved being in court. Loved it. He played to the gallery. It was power and control."

The first time she found herself in court, in 2012, was after social services told her that the existing arrangement with Robert - whereby he could see the children under the supervision of a friend or family member - was no longer sufficient. A social worker told her she had to ask a judge to formalise Robert's contact with the children via a court order - and if she didn't, they would have to assess whether she was protecting her children properly, even whether they should be taken into care. Doing as advised, Julia lodged an application with the family court. Robert then lodged a counter-application for the children to live with him on a 50:50 basis.

So much of what happens in family court is banned by law from being reported, so all these years later, Julia can say nothing of the evidence given in court, or what findings were made by the judge regarding her own allegations that Robert had domestically abused her. She can only disclose that she secured a non-molestation order against her ex and that, despite his repeated applications, he never succeeded in persuading a court that he should see the children without another adult present. And yet the courts permitted hearing after hearing. "The court's starting point was always 'Why are these children not seeing their paedophile convicted father? Is the mother being unfair to the father?'," Julia says.

When the first set of legal proceedings ended, Julia, exhausted by the process, applied for a barring order. This would not prevent Robert issuing new applications to the court, but it would mean his requests would be screened to decide if they were vexatious. But the judge refused. And for years, each time Julia begged for a barring order, the same decision came back. So Robert would bring yet another case to court.

Last year, a Ministry of Justice report was scathing about the harms inflicted by the family justice system; it recommended judges be more willing to make barring orders to protect parents from being abused again, through the courts. The government is reviewing whether the law that says contact with both parents is in a child's best interests - which underpins what is widely characterised as the family court's culture of "contact at all costs" - should be repealed.

Julia remains bewildered by the Kafkaesque position she was put in. "I had social services saying that if I let him see the kids, they would investigate to see if I was strong enough to protect my children - they might even take them off me - and the family court saying that his convictions for sexual assaults of minors were not necessarily enough to stop him seeing the children.

"That was despite the fact he never showed any remorse for what he'd done to those girls. It was always up to me to prove that he was still a risk.

"My whole life had been sucked into dealing with these spurious allegations. For years, it was like a second job, and I had never said he couldn't see the children, I just wanted it supervised - and now a convicted paedophile was saying I was psychologically abusing my children ...

"The impact on me was deemed irrelevant because the only thing the court cared about was the importance of them having contact with their father.

"We had so many different judges, and some of them spoke to me in a vile and totally disrespectful way," she recalls.

"Barristers would say awful, belittling things about me in court. It was demoralising, and frankly disgusting, given that the situation I was having to deal with was caused by someone else's criminal behaviour and risk profile, not mine."

She remains furious that Robert was publicly funded by the Legal Aid Agency. "I wrote to them three times to explain who he was and what he'd

done; three times they removed his funding, and three times they reinstated it," she says. "It's completely ethically wrong that this man has public funding that could go to help some abused mother."

She believes there needs to be more transparency about legal aid funding decisions and strict rules about funding people with relevant convictions.

Julia has succeeded in protecting her children, but the toll it has taken is incalculable and enduring. Her marriage to a man she later fell in love with, and with whom she had a child, did not survive the strain of the repeated court proceedings. She says her older children have an antipathy towards social workers after the many intrusive interviews they were put through, and have no faith that the family justice system operates in their best interests. The continuing litigation was also damaging her children's mental health, a child psychiatrist reported.

Only finally, in 2019, after a psychiatrist had diagnosed her as suffering from severe and debilitating post-traumatic stress disorder, did a judge agree to a barring order against Robert. He is now allowed only to write to the children four times a year - which he has never done.

"The barring order I got was for three years," she says with a small smile, a tear sliding down her face. "So it's just over a year till it expires. I find it hard to think he won't go back to court, if he gets funding again. It's something he gets a lot of power and enjoyment from."

What does she think he will ask for? She laughs. "He's never written to the kids. He's shown he's not interested in them. So I don't fear for the outcome any more as I used to. But if he makes another application I have no doubt it'll be heard, like they've heard everything else."

Julia tells her story in *Dispatches: Torn Apart - Family Courts Uncovered*, on Channel 4 at 10pm on Tuesday 21 July 2021.