

STAR EXCLUSIVE

'This could have been stopped'

Alleged victim of billionaire businessman Frank Stronach details 'terrifying' night in 1980

WENDY GILLIS
CRIME REPORTER

One of Frank Stronach's accusers says she reported his alleged crimes against her to Toronto police nearly a decade ago, telling investigators that the billionaire businessman had sexually assaulted her when she was employed as a worker at his Aurora farm, when she was 20.

But after going to a police station to give a full account of a "terrifying" July 1980 night — which began with a birthday celebration at Stronach's restaurant — the woman says she never again heard from Toronto police.

It would take years for officers from a different police force to lay criminal charges in her case — among 13 counts Stronach now faces that span nearly 50 years and are alleged to involve 10 victims.

It is alleged that two of the victims were sexually assaulted within the past 15 months.

"This could have been stopped before any more harm came," the 1980 complainant told the Star in an exclusive interview.

"I'm angry."

Stronach, the 91-year-old founder of auto parts manufacturer Magna International, has "categorically" denied the allegations against him through statements from his lawyer, Brian Greenspan, who has said his client will "vigorously" defend himself against the accusations.

The Star sent a detailed account of the woman's allegations against Stronach to his lawyer. In response Friday, Greenspan reiterated his client's past denials and provided a new statement, noting Stronach, "like all Canadians values the time honoured legal principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty."

"However, unlike most Canadians, he faces the reputational damage which constant media attention attracts. Although gratified by the many expressions of support he has received, we ask that the public respect the fundamental precept that Mr. Stronach remains innocent of any wrongdoing and that he will respond to these allegations in a fair and public court of law," Greenspan's statement read.

None of the allegations have been tested in court, and Stronach is scheduled to make a first appearance in a Brampton courtroom Monday. Reached briefly by phone Friday, Stronach said "thank you" before hanging up.

In a statement on Friday, a spokesperson said Toronto police cannot comment on matters before the courts.

The 1980 complainant's story is the first public account of the allegations against Stronach since Peel Regional Police last month charged him with five offences, including rape and sexual assault, involving three victims. Then, late last month, after saying they had identified additional victims, police laid eight more charges against Stronach involving seven new complainants: six counts of sexual assault and two historical charges of attempted rape and indecent assault on a female.

The Star is not naming the 1980 complainant because, as an alleged victim of sexual assault, her identity is subject to a publication ban.

She told the Star she was a 20-year-old employee of Stronach-owned Beechwood Farm, a property north of Toronto that later became a stallion- and horse-breeding complex.

A longtime horse lover, she said she had been pleased to land the job, and during her months-long stint as an employee — doing tasks that included exercising and grooming horses — she encountered Stronach in the stables.

She began to think of Stronach, who was on his way to becoming a renowned thoroughbred breeder and racer, as a mentor when it came to caring for horses, she said.

That July, the woman was days away from turning 21, so she and two other female employees went to celebrate her birthday at Rooney's, a now-shuttered Toronto restaurant and bar owned by Stronach, believing they would get a discount.



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ALLEGED SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIM

When the woman arrived at the bar, her two female colleagues were already there, so she joined them at a table.

Before any menu arrived, the woman said, Stronach, then 47, came to the table, a bottle of champagne in his hand.

"I told him I didn't drink, but he opened it anyway and poured champagne," she said.

In part because he was her employer, "I felt I had no choice but to drink the champagne," she said, even though "I can't handle alcohol."

Before she knew it, the woman said, she was on the dance floor with him, and Stronach was holding her "very tight to him."

She alleges he assaulted her there for the first time. She said she remembers there were other people on the dance floor, and she was aware she and Stronach were "in complete view of the bar staff."

"He pushed my dress up, punctured my pantyhose and stuck fingers inside of me," she said.

"I tried to shove him away and I said no and objected and he took me off the dance floor and shoved me into a booth," she said.

Though she says she was "really quite out of it" by this point, the woman said, she believed there were two men sitting on the other side of the restaurant booth while Stronach "continued with the assault."

Details of what immediately happened next are unclear. The complainant said she doesn't remember how she got out of the booth or how she was transported to a second location, but she said she was eventually taken to an apartment that had a darkened small bedroom.

She said she remembers later seeing a window that looked out onto the Toronto Islands and concluded she was near the waterfront.

She said she doesn't remember anything until she woke up there, near dawn. She recalls looking up to the ceiling and noticing it had a mirror. She saw her own face reflected back, "with him on top of me."

She alleges she was raped in the apartment by Stronach.

She said she went into the bathroom "to figure out what was happening" and what to do.

"I just went into survival mode," she said.

"At that point, employer or not, he

was my abductor and rapist, and I feared for my life if I didn't go along while looking for an escape," she said.

Eventually, she said, Stronach drove her back to her car, which was parked on a side street beside Rooney's.

Shortly thereafter, when she arrived at the home she shared with her parents, the phone rang, she said. Her mother picked it up, and told her: "Frank wants to talk to you," the woman said, noting her parents would have known Stronach owned the farm where she worked.

"I just said, 'No no, I don't want to talk to him,'" she said, prompting her mother to hang up the phone. "That really scared me. I didn't know what was happening."

The woman said she never went back to work at the barn after that night.

She said she didn't feel she could confide in her parents and didn't consider going to police.

"I knew immediately that it was wrong, and that I had been raped, but at that time, 1980, it was always the victim's fault, no matter what the circumstances," she said.

But by 2015, as more victims of sexual assault were coming forward and societal opinions were shifting, she eventually decided to report it to police.

She said she initially called her local police division in Halton region, but was ultimately directed to Toronto police, because it was their jurisdiction. She said she went to a Toronto police division and gave a statement to two officers.

As she spoke, she said, she got the impression they weren't open to her allegations and did not believe her.

"I felt they kept pushing me and pushing me and pushing me," she said.

"I felt scared, I felt interrogated, I felt like a criminal."

She doesn't recall if anything was said to her by police about next steps. Regardless, "I never heard another word back from them. Nothing," she said.

The woman said she didn't inquire or follow up with the police because she assumed she wasn't believed.

"I just thought, 'What's the point?'" she said. "I just kind of gave up on it all."

She said she remained troubled about the police handling of the case, in part because she believed there could be other victims. She said she thought this in part because it seemed there was "a pretty slick operation" around Stronach at the time of her encounter with him, citing the bar staff who didn't do anything on the night of her alleged assault, when she believes she likely wouldn't have been walking on her own.

It wasn't until recently that she says she was contacted by an officer from Peel Regional Police, who said they had come upon her previous

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MICHAEL WILCHESKY
COMPLAINANT'S LAWYER, WHO SPECIALIZES IN CIVIL SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES

report to Toronto police. She said she got the impression the force was "doing their due diligence searching for other reports across the years and following up."

A spokesperson for the Peel Regional Police said Friday the service could not provide any comment "as the matter is before the courts."

The woman said because Peel investigators got her complaint from Toronto police she didn't have to go in for another interview, though she answered a few questions. She described investigators as respectful — "I felt I was in conversation with the investigator not interrogation," adding that she wants any other potential victims to feel safe coming forward.

Last month, she got news that left her "elated." She was told Stronach would be charged with rape and indecent assault on a female in her case.

"The police officer said, 'We believe you,'" she said. "I needed to hear that."

Michael Wilchesky, the complainant's lawyer who specializes in civil sexual assault cases, said that kind of validation can be hugely beneficial. Speaking generally, he said, survivors of sexual assault can doubt themselves if they've previously disclosed what happened and weren't believed.

He stressed that anyone who has been sexually assaulted has the right to understand legal options, including going to police or suing, noting Ontario has a program that offers free and confidential legal advice to victims. "It's so important for people to know that they have the option just to speak to a lawyer," he said.

The woman said the alleged assault "hugely" affected her life, including that she did not pursue her early dream of professionally working with horses.

She encourages victims of sexual assault to tell someone they trust about what happened — family, friends, a therapist or lawyer. Otherwise, she said, it could "fester inside of you."

"I want to make it clear to others that it's never too late to come forward," she said.

Frank Stronach leaves Peel Regional Police 22 Division in Brampton on Tuesday. Stronach, who is facing charges related to a sexual assault investigation into incidents police say date back to the 1980s, has "categorically" denied the allegations against him.

ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE
TORONTO STAR
FILE PHOTO

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE, RESOURCES AND SUPPORT ARE AVAILABLE ON THE WEBSITE OF THE ONTARIO COALITION OF RAPE CRISIS CENTRES. THE ONTARIO-WIDE ASSAULTED WOMEN'S HOTLINE IS 1-866-863-0511 AND THE MALE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE NUMBER IS 1-866-887-0015.