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UPDATED JUL 27, 2012 9:27 PM ET

WAKEFIELD, MASS.

Kayla Harrison came here five years ago, to a tucked-away industrial warehouse next to Stewy's Custom Cycles and Fahey's Tire Center. She was 16 and, for the first time, on her own.

It wasn't so much that she was running away, although in a sense she was. She had moved from her family home in Ohio to this town north of Boston to chase her dreams: To study under America's only two-time judo Olympic medalist. To become an Olympian herself. And most of all, to start over.

But before she came here — before she could shape herself into perhaps the finest female athlete American judo has ever seen — she needed to tell someone her secret.

"I didn't even know what to talk about," Kayla says now. "I'd spent the last five years pretending everything was fine. It's hard to turn that off. ... I just didn't know where to start."

Where to start, then? Start in 2007, when Kayla steeled herself and walked into the courtroom to take the witness stand, and then her abuser finally relented, decided to plead guilty and took a 10-year prison sentence. Or start before that, when the years of grooming by her judo coach, a man 16 years older than her named Daniel Doyle, had turned Kayla into an ideal sex-abuse victim, someone who both loved and feared her volatile, demanding coach: "Whatever he said went," Kayla says.

Or start even before that. Start when a mother wanted her eight-year-old girl to learn to protect herself. Start when that mother took her little girl to Renshuden Judo Academy in Centerville, Ohio, with no clue of what was to come.



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Kayla Harrison doesn't want this story to only be about sex abuse.

This story, she believes, should be about other things, too. It should be, first and foremost, about her intense and respectful and underappreciated sport, a sport that gains huge followings in Japan, France and Brazil but barely registers a blip in America.

This story should be not about her past but about her present and future – a future that could see her not just as America's first judo gold medalist but also as a happily married young lady and a newly minted firefighter near Boston.

She'd rather this story to be filled with kind words from close friends, words like these: "You're talking about the most dominant female athlete American judo has ever had and possibly will ever see," said the U.S. Olympic Judo coach, two-time Olympic medalist Jimmy Pedro. "At age 21 she's the best female competitor we've ever had in the history of our country."

If she could start over and rewrite her own story, Kayla would write it differently. She'd be just another American success story heading to her first Olympics.

But she can't. So her story must be about so much more.

"I do believe things happen for a reason," she says now. "Sometimes, if you want sunshine, you gotta deal with rain. Am I happy it happened to me? No. Would I wish it on anyone? No. Did it make me a stronger person? Absolutely."

But it wasn't until about five months ago when she realized her story needs to be out in the open, not just some buried part of her past.

That moment came in the days after the Jerry Sandusky pedophilia scandal at Penn State. Kayla had nearly come to peace with her years of being sexually abused. Being a victim no longer defined who she was. Then the Sandusky allegations threw the American sporting scene into chaos. Talk of the horrors of childhood sexual abuse ruled the airwaves. Kayla remembers being horrified at the allegations of child rape, like we all were, and horrified at the endemic football-first culture that apparently helped Sandusky's actions stay hidden for years.

But one other thing horrified her more. It was soon after the allegations came out, and the heat was on Penn State to fire Joe Paterno for his role. A throng of students converged on campus. They held a rally, and the rally was for the football coach.

Not the sexual-abuse victims. No, these supposedly enlightened students ignored the fact so many children had been hurt, and instead they rallied to protect a football coach's job.

That's when Kayla knew: The world needs to hear from more people like her, victims who've overcome their victimhood.

"I was almost disheartened by my country, to hear that kids at Penn State were protesting for JoePa



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but not for the victims," Kayla says. "What kind of world do I live in? Are students really doing that? When that happened, when the victim was that far away (from people's minds), I was in shock."

And so she began telling people what happened, beating back those taboos on sex-abuse victims speaking frankly. She talked about how she got hooked on judo as a kid, how in middle school she was going to practice five times a week, about how Doyle would pick her up from school and take her to practice every day. "Since I was eight years old, he was my sun," she says. "I wanted to do nothing but please him. I thought my world revolved around him."

She talked about going traveling around the world with him, to judo competitions in exotic places like Estonia, Venezuela and Russia. She talked about when the abuse started — around age 11, she guesses, as she was making a national name for herself in judo — and she talked about how awful it was after Doyle was arrested, and the news was on CNN, and judo chat forums online debated what Kayla's role was.

And she talked about those conflicting emotions when she watched her old coach get sentenced to 10 years in prison. After all, this was the man that Kayla for years had assumed she'd marry after she turned 18.

"It was bittersweet," she says now. "It was definitely closure. I needed to get up in front of the judge and him and say my piece. I explained to the judge that what once was my passion (judo) is now my prison. It was the toughest day of my life. It was heart-wrenching. I didn't know what to feel, and that made it worse. Everyone was so happy, so excited. Everybody had been so angry for so long.

"To everyone else, that was the end. They could move on with their lives. But it wasn't that easy for me."



WATCH OUT

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Walk up the stairs at Pedro's Judo Center, past the photograph of Jimmy Pedro at the Atlanta Olympics, past the sign at the top that reads, "Please show respect by BOWING at the white line upon entering the dojo."

Sitting on a bench next to the judo mat is Kayla Harrison: blond hair, blue eyes, thick shoulders and biceps that would make the average man wince. A big smile creeps across her face as she tosses barbs back and forth with her coaches. A bunch of electrodes are stuck to her left knee. She injured it a few weeks back, a partial MCL tear while in training, a painful injury but not one that will keep her from competing in the 78-kilo weight class in the Olympics.

These days, her mind isn't consumed by her old judo coach. Her new coaches, Pedro and his father, Big Jim, helped her get into therapy. They enrolled her in a local school so she could make friends outside the sport. They focused on her as a person.

"When I first moved here I struggled," Kayla says. "The only word I can really describe it is numb. I hated my mom, I hated judo, I hated everyone. And Jimmy and Big Jim kind of broke through that. They made it OK for me to be a kid again."

And so, instead of going to bed every night thinking about her abuser, she visualizes this coming Aug. 2, the day of the judo competition in the London Olympics.

She imagines herself putting on her lucky T-shirt in the morning. She imagines stepping into the arena and putting on her warm-up song, "Lose Yourself," by Eminem. She imagines winning her first match, maybe with a choke or maybe with an arm bar, and then her second match, and with each match she gets stronger.

She imagines the gold-medal match that afternoon. She imagines her new coach helping to calm her and control her breathing.

And she imagines saying her mantra, repeating it again and again in her head, willing her gold medal to come true: "This is my day," she repeats to herself. "This is my purpose. I'm not afraid to win."



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She doesn't think about her old judo coach. She only thinks about the Olympics, and she visualizes that day so clearly she gets goosebumps.

You can follow Reid Forgrave on Twitter @reidforgrave, become a fan on Facebook or email him at reidforgrave@gmail.com.

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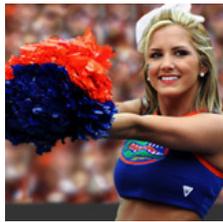
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