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What is a False Accusation and How Can a False Accusation Impact the Life of the Accused?

In 2002, famous psychologist Dr. Phil made this statement in reference to false accusations; “Accept that there is no way you can erase what has happened. Even though the accusations may be unfair and untrue, the situation is real”. This statement clearly analyzes the circumstances of many false accusation cases. Despite the fact that the accusation is false, there are very real circumstances that the accused endures regardless of the truth. There have been thousands of cases that involved false accusations. Some of the accused have been able to escape the detrimental consequences of the allegations but unfortunately many people have not been so successful. The term false accusation will be clearly defined in order to apply this definition to specific cases and examine how false accusation has affected its victims.

The Legal Referral Service of the New York City Bar defines false accusation as “the defamation of character by libel or slander”. Defamation is a false statement against another person that damages their character. Libel is defamation that is written and slander is defamation that is spoken orally. Defamation must clearly identify the target and the accuser must know that the statement is false. The consequences of defamation can consist of ruining the victim’s reputation or causing them harm. An example of libel would be someone posting on social media that another student has been to jail. This false accusation damages the character of the victim because those who may have seen the post immediately begin to view he or she as a criminal. An example of slander would be a coworker telling their supervisor that someone is not completing their daily tasks. In this scenario the employee’s reputation is ruined in the eyes of their supervisor which unfortunately jeopardizes their job. In either situation, someone’s character is ruined and their reputation is destroyed.

Incidents of false accusation have dated back centuries, some cases being more well known than others. One of the most popular cases is the tragedy of Emmett Till. Till was brutally murdered in 1955 after being accused of flirting with a white woman, Carolyn Donham. At the age of 14 Emmett Till entered a store that belonged to Carolyn Donham and her husband. At the

time no one knew what exactly happened inside the store however, Mrs. Donham made accusations against Till claiming that he grabbed her and that she was verbally insulted by him. Regardless of the actual encounter, during the Jim Crow era anything that she said was enough to have an African American killed. Four days after his trip to the store, Till was kidnapped from his home, beaten until he could no longer be recognized, shot in the head, and thrown in the Tallahatchie river. In 2007 Donham confessed that her allegations against Emmett Till were not true. Although two men were found guilty for the murder of Emmett Till, the false accusations against him were not denied until six decades after his death.

Another famous example of false accusation is the case of the Central Park Jogger and the Exonerated Five, who's story was recently told in the series *When They See Us* directed by Ava Duvernay. In 1989 a woman jogging in Central Park was beaten, raped, and left for dead. She was rendered unconscious and remained in a coma for 12 days. Coincidentally, there were 30 young African American and Hispanic men that were in the park around the time of the crime. These young men were investigated, questioned, and coerced until five of them were found guilty for the crime, becoming known as the Central Park Five. Despite the fact that the DNA from the crime scene did not match the DNA of any of the accused, the five young men, between the ages of 14 and 16, received prison sentences ranging from six to 13 years. It was not until 2002, that the real criminal, Matias Reyes, confessed to sexually assaulting and attacking the victim. In this case the Exonerated Five were falsely accused by the prosecutor Linda Fairstein and the court system with slander and libel which caused them a lifetime of turmoil.

False accusations will not only affect the victims who were falsely accused, but also those who made the false claims. In the case of Emmett Till, the most detrimental consequence of the false accusations that were made was the loss of a child's life. Being that he was only 14, he never had the opportunity to grow into adulthood. Furthermore, his murder affected his mother and his immediate family immensely. Carolyn Donham also suffers as a result of her false allegations. Since 1955 she has lived with the guilt of knowing that she was the cause of a

senseless murder. She now lives in secrecy and fear with the blood of Emmett Till on her hands as a result of her false claims.

In relation to the case of the Exonerated Five, their lives have been completely changed due to the false claims that were made against them. These young men were academically achieving students and upstanding people in the eyes of their family and friends. However, after being falsely accused and sent to prison, society began to view them as criminals. This caused them to struggle in finding work and reintegrating back into society after being released. The five men endured physical and psychological abuse as well, causing them to carry the anger of being falsely accused at a young age with them throughout adulthood. The prosecutor Linda Fairstein is currently dealing with the consequences of her actions. Recently she has stepped down from various positions and has faced backlash on social media. Unfortunately, false accusations will continue to happen however there are many consequences that those involved will inevitably face. In reference to Dr. Phil, these situations were very real in spite of the accusations being untrue.

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