

A Teen Reporter Searched for His Community in the Epstein Files. Adults Freaked Out
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An Instagram post turned one California student newspaper into a free-speech flash point. The students say they were just doing their homework.



Ben Mueller. PHOTOGRAPH: AMY HARRITY

BEN MUELLER'S ASSIGNMENT for his journalism class was to tell a news story—any news story—in the form of an extended [Instagram](#) slideshow. So when the high school senior got home on the afternoon of February 10, 2026, he grabbed a snack, went upstairs to his room, and settled in to work.

After allowing himself a few minutes of procrastination—scouting prospective college campuses on Google Earth—Mueller navigated over to the Department of Justice's Epstein Library portal and clicked through the page asking whether he was 18 or older (he was, just barely). Then he began poking around for ideas in the 3 million pages of Epstein files that had been added 11 days earlier.

Mueller really liked working in his bedroom, with its beanbag chair and view of people strolling and biking along one of Marin County, [California](#)'s sun-dappled waterways. Having lived his whole life in one of the wealthiest parts of America, Mueller couldn't help thinking his area probably had some ties to [Jeffrey Epstein](#). "I think it's very difficult to get an immense amount of money without—this is my opinion—without doing something a little shady," Mueller says. So he sat on his bedroom floor and spent the next five hours combing the federal database for links to the towns and cities of Marin.

He found thousands. Most of them were trivial (Epstein liked to shop online at Restoration Hardware, headquartered in nearby Corte Madera). But a few things stood out: a 2014 art gala in Sausalito that Epstein helped promote; a meeting with Woody Allen in Tiburon; and—above

all—a 2013 email exchange between Epstein and an address bearing the name of a woman associated with a French model casting agency called Mill Valley Connection. “Regarding Hannah, my Austrian model,” read one particularly chilling message, “we can come and see you this evening if you are interested, and in that case let me know how I can get my fees.”

Two days later, on February 12, Mueller posted his story to the Instagram feed of the Redwood Bark, his school’s student-run publication. It was a carousel-style [slideshow](#) pitched at readers across the county. “Which Marin towns were mentioned in the Epstein files?” the first panel reads. “Scroll to see how many times your town was mentioned.” Rather than quote from the most alarming document he’d found, Mueller kept his descriptions fairly general and brief: “Mill Valley was mentioned in the context of providing models to Epstein from a woman named Gisele Attias Bonnouvrier.”

More than 4,000 people liked the story. The comments filled up with praise: “This is the kind of journalism we need.” “Higher quality reporting than local outlets.” “High schoolers doing better reporting than national news.” “Didn’t think I’d be following a random CA HS newspaper in 2026 for their breaking reporting but here we are.”

As Mueller watched the numbers climb, he felt excited but also a little perplexed. “I didn’t really think I was doing groundbreaking journalism,” he says. “I was just like, this is another piece of homework that I have to do today, and I’ve just got to get it done—but also be thorough, because people are going to see it on the internet.”

About a week and a half later, Mueller was home sick with a light fever and cough when the phone rang. It was his journalism teacher, Erin Schneider, with bad news. “This person mentioned in your post is now threatening to sue the district,” she said.

On Monday, February 23, Bonnouvrier, the woman affiliated with the model casting agency, had sent an email to the principal of Redwood High School, calling Mueller’s post defamatory, demanding its immediate removal, and promising legal action if the school did not comply within 48 hours. And now the district superintendent was demanding that the Bark either redact Bonnouvrier’s name or delete the slide entirely.



The Redwood Bark won eighth place last year in a major national competition run by the National Scholastic Press Association.

PHOTOGRAPH: AMY HARRITY

THE REDWOOD BARK happens to be one of the most award-winning high school newspapers in the United States. Madison Bishop—a poised, rosy-cheeked, 18-year old colleague of Mueller’s—says she was an avid Bark reader even as a kid, before her older sister served as editor in chief back in 2022. “It was just such a well-known student paper,” she says.

Bishop and Mueller both arrived on the Bark staff during a time of experimentation. Over the previous decade, Schneider and her students had pushed the Bark beyond old-school print and basic web articles, expanding into Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and a podcast. Then during the first few weeks of this past school year, Schneider says, they flipped the switch toward being “social-media first”—publishing some full stories directly to the platforms.

As the Bark’s social media manager, Bishop oversaw the transition, which she saw as a kind of power move: Social media wasn’t just where all the Bark’s students got their news, it’s where kids have the most natural authority. “It gives us a space to have a leg up from adults,” she says. “It really lets them sit down and listen and absorb what we have to say, because we are the quote-unquote professionals.”

Case in point: As soon as the Bark leaders saw the superintendent’s demands, they knew Instagram wouldn’t allow them to edit an already published slide; simply redacting Bonnouvrier’s name, in other words, was not a viable option. Another problem was that Redwood High’s principal was out of the country and unable to meet. With the pressure of a 48-hour legal threat looming over them, they would have to decide how to respond to the district on their own.

Once everyone was back at school on Tuesday, the high schoolers lawyered up during their lunch hour. Gathered around the speakerphone in Schneider’s office, Bishop and Mueller consulted an attorney with the national Student Press Law Center. When he heard the students’ problem, the lawyer laughed, Schneider recalls. “If this woman thinks she’s going to sue your school district, she’s got another thing coming,” he said. “Her name is in the Epstein files—no lawyer is going to represent her in this case.” The students also consulted Mueller’s parents—both lawyers—and another attorney, who all concluded that the Bark had done nothing wrong.



Madison Bishop was social media manager of the Redwood Bark until she graduated in June.
PHOTOGRAPH: AMY HARRITY

Increasingly convinced that they hadn't defamed anyone, the Bark staffers weighed their options. After school, Mueller, Schneider, Bishop, and another Bark editor sat down on the blue couches in their newsroom for a grueling four-hour debate. Painstakingly, they double-checked every single word on Mueller's slide, verifying it against the federal documents.

They were on the verge of deciding to leave the Instagram post alone. But after Schneider headed out for the evening, the students kept second-guessing themselves. They ended up deciding to temporarily archive Mueller's most controversial slide until they could meet with school officials in person. "I think at the end of the day, the kids felt such pressure from the administration that they were almost looking for a reason to get out from under it," says Schneider, who had butted heads with school officials several times that year over the Bark. (Schneider is also someone I've known for years; I'm a massage therapist in Marin County, and Schneider used to be an occasional client before I started working as a journalist.)

That evening, the students wrote a note advising Schneider what they wanted to communicate to the principal; they framed their takedown of Mueller's slide as entirely their own prerogative. "We want to be clear that the removal was not in response to your request," they wrote. "Our choice was based on our own ethical considerations and editorial standards."

The message was puzzling to Schneider, who saw the administrators' demand as a pretty clear example of censorship. But the Bark reporters didn't see themselves as having given in.

FINALLY, THAT THURSDAY, Mueller and Bishop met in person with principal Barnaby Payne and Courtney Goode, superintendent of the Tamalpais Union High School District. Schneider came along too, but only to take notes. As she remembers it, the meeting started tense.

Goode opened by explaining that the district couldn't possibly afford a legal battle. Mueller and Bishop stayed quiet, letting the administrators finish before asking them to clarify exactly what was libelous about the post.

The administrators, it turned out, were primarily worried that Mueller had reported something that simply wasn't true. The district's own research, Goode explained, had found no evidence that Bonnouvrier was connected to providing models to Epstein. "You need to link your source to this," Goode said.

Realizing the adults had likely just done a basic Google search, which couldn't access files deep in the federal Epstein database, Mueller pulled out his phone and opened to the specific document, showing his screen. "The source is just the Epstein files," Mueller said. "It is true, because it says it right here in a government document." On the screen was the email about an "Austrian model," which seemed to take the two men aback.

The high schoolers then launched into a breakdown of California Education Code 48907, reminding the administrators of state law. Unless content is obscene, incites violence or illegal activity, or is false or libelous, student journalists have total freedom of expression without administrative oversight.

“Well, you know, I just had to make sure that we weren’t going to get sued,” Goode said, according to Schneider’s notes.

“With all due respect,” Schneider remembers Bishop replying, “under California’s student press law, being afraid of a lawsuit or backlash is not a valid reason to call for the takedown of content.”

Bishop described the 30-minute meeting as “a very open conversation” that ended with everyone “on the same page that the post legally does not have to be taken down.” (In a statement to WIRED, Goode said the post was “briefly paused” until “it was determined that the information referenced was factual and publicly available.”) The next day, Mueller and Bishop went back to the newsroom and restored the archived Instagram slide.

Bonnouvrier, who declined to comment on this story, never made good on her legal threat. (Following this article's publication, Bonnouvrier emailed WIRED to say that she “was never involved in any of this.”) But the fallout was far from over. About two weeks after the meeting, Schneider sent an email to all Bark students and their parents. “I am writing to let you know that I will be stepping away on a leave from the journalism program effective today, Monday, March 9,” she wrote.

For Schneider, the clash over Mueller’s post had been one of the final straws in what she regarded as a yearlong battle over administrative interference. In another recent incident, the Bark had published a cover image of a student protest against the Trump administration held in San Francisco. The demonstrators in the photo are holding up a banner that says “Students Fight Back.” In smaller print, the banner includes the words “Against Zionism.” After reader objections rolled in, including one Instagram comment comparing the Bark to the Ku Klux Klan, the school district announced it was opening a mandatory investigation; board policy required as much, they said, in any case of public complaints.

“The work of defending First Amendment rights and helping young journalists report responsibly on real-world topics is work I believe in deeply,” Schneider wrote in her farewell email. “It is also work that has met significant resistance.” Her departure caught the Bark staff completely by surprise. In a newsroom meeting that morning, the paper’s student leaders broke the news to their colleagues through tears.



Redwood High School.

PHOTOGRAPH: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

It wasn't until more than a month later, after emotions had cooled and the Redwood students had returned from spring break, that the story of Mueller's post blew up beyond Marin. "Small High School Sparks Fury Over Witch Hunt Into Student Paper for Exposing Woman's Link to Epstein," ran a headline in the News Corp.-owned California Post. "High school administrators censored a student newspaper," began a post by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a campus free-speech watchdog, which also posted a video about the incident to social media. Stories also ran on California Public Radio and the news site EdSource.

To some commenters, the Redwood High dispute was a case of liberal elite corruption in Governor Gavin Newsom's California. (Newsom is a Redwood alum.) To others it mirrored a broader national climate of intimidation and administrative crackdowns on every level of American life. Indeed, the Student Press Law Center says it has experienced a 42 percent increase in legal defense requests from school newspapers to its legal hotline over the past two years—as students use confidential sources to report on hot-button topics (immigration raids, Gaza, campus protests, the Epstein files) and administrators try to keep a low profile by clamping down.

The Redwood High students found most of the coverage annoying. Mueller and the other Bark staffers felt increasingly uncomfortable being cast as victims. "Calling it censorship really convolutes the story," says Mueller, who didn't like being painted as "weak and submissive" and scared of a principal. In an editorial note posted on May 27, the Bark staff stressed that they had briefly removed their slide by choice, calling the standoff with administrators a "simple misunderstanding" rather than a high-handed abuse of power.

But mostly—with AP classes and Bark assignments and graduation looming—Mueller just wanted to put the story behind him. "It was a little tiring just to see it come back up," he says. "People are making a big deal about this because it feels like something more serious than it is."

As it happened, Bishop had spent much of the school year reporting on student journalism controversies. She'd made a short documentary on the censorship-driven collapse of nearby Novato High's newspaper, covered the forced reassignment of a journalism adviser at Lowell High School in San Francisco, and reported on a Virginia student newsroom that successfully

resisted administrative control—and for all that work, Bishop had earned third place in a competition for California Student Journalist of the Year. But she didn't really see the Bark controversy in the same light. The students had kept hold of the reins, in her mind, through one adult intervention after another. "At the end of the day, all decisions are final by the students," she said this spring. "I know sometimes it can get distracting with external, adult conflicts. They disagree. They want this taken down. They're leaving. But it is a student-run class, and students are the voice of the paper."

In June, Mueller and Bishop themselves edged closer to the world of adults who have no business telling Bark staffers what to report. On the 11th, they both graduated. Bishop is heading to the University of Southern California to study journalism. Mueller is set to attend William and Mary in Virginia. He's keeping his options open but says he might check out the college paper.

Update: 7/24/2026, 3:45 PM EDT: WIRED has updated the article to include further details about the French model casting agency identified as having sent the email. WIRED has also included a denial from the person whose account sent that email. Let us know what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor at mail@wired.com.