Jennifer Becker, a school crossing guard, is facing multiple criminal charges for conduct calculated to brand a Staten Island chiropractor as a racist. (Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel)

By Daniel Leddy
For the Staten Island Advance

Last Thursday, the Staten Island District Attorney's Office dismissed all criminal charges against former Castleton Corners chiropractor Danielle Serini, who had been accused of conducting a vicious campaign of harassment and intimidation against Jennifer Becker, a school crossing guard. The case drew widespread media attention when several letters and fliers, alleged to have been sent by Serini, contained racially-charged threats against Becker's child, who is of mixed race. The Advance, for instance, received a flier containing a photo of the boy with the notation: "BLACK LIVES DON'T MATTER. KILL THIS N----- PIECE BY PIECE AND FEED IT TO THE NYPD."

The burgeoning story was so damaging to Serini that she was forced to close her chiropractic office and move. Upon further investigation, however, police concluded that the shockingly offensive material had, in reality, been devised and disseminated by Becker
herself as part of her own campaign of harassment and intimidation against Serini. At her arraignment on numerous criminal charges last Thursday, Becker was ordered to undergo a mental health evaluation and obey four orders of protection issued against her.

It's tempting to view this whole sordid episode as an important lesson on how jumping to conclusions, in the face of mere charges, is inimical to fundamental fairness, the most basic principle of a just society. The problem with such a convenient characterization, however, is that it's unduly solicitous of people who really ought to know better.

**Allegations prove nothing**

Clear-thinking individuals understand early in their lives, and dutifully remember, that allegations by themselves prove nothing. And they remain mere allegations until the individual targeted either admits their validity, or they're established as true by a duly-empowered, neutral fact-finder. To condemn a person as guilty, or draw adverse inferences against him or her on the basis of allegations alone is flagrantly unjust and mindlessly irresponsible.

Yellow journalists feed the rush to judgment that greets sensational allegations, particularly where, as in Serini's case, they involve topics that are socially or politically volatile. The New York Daily News, for example, initiated its coverage of the baseless charges against the chiropractor with this screaming headline: "Dum-Dum lollipop-wielding Staten Island chiropractor busted for racist threats against black child." Then, shedding any pretense of objectivity at the outset, the tabloid's "news" story began with this assumption of guilt: "Hope you enjoy jail, dum-dum."

Even worse, The Root, an online magazine of African-American culture, ran its coverage of the story under this highly inflammatory headline: "N---ers don't belong in my neighborhood." The reporter, Breanna Edwards, who is also an editor of "The Root," then added this comment to her story: "Listen, I know defense lawyers have a job to do, but in some cases I'm just like...really? This is what we're doing today? With this evidence." She thus deemed the allegations against Serini to be not only evidence of guilt, but so conclusive of it that no lawyer should even bother contesting them.

**High-profile targets**

Serini's exoneration comes at a time when high-profile American men in various walks of life, especially politics and entertainment, are being accused of sexual improprieties in unprecedented numbers and with seemingly daily frequency. Since the widely-publicized charges against Hollywood powerhouse Harvey Weinstein, more than 30 such men have found themselves publicly targeted by women who claim to have been victimized by them, in some instances decades ago.

Ranging from lurid text messaging, through groping, to rape, the explosive allegations are producing two reciprocal lines of socio-political dogma. First, they're necessarily true, with their veracity underscored if additional accusers emerge. Second, anybody questioning whether they're true, or even suggesting caution in evaluating them, is, at best, insensitive to the victims or, at worst, defending the sexual abuse of women. In reality, however, and notwithstanding the heretical nature of saying so, they're still mere allegations and nothing more.
False claims are ruining ordinary people's lives every day in endless ways, including an epidemic of baseless allegations of child sexual abuse in custody and visitation cases, and maliciously-driven online defamations. The risk of being falsely accused has always been far greater for people of prominence and wealth, however, and it is incalculably more so today. Unless an accuser identifies herself as a citizen of Pluto, her mere allegations, standing alone, without a scintilla of proof, are now sufficient to trigger banner headlines and throw her target's life, family and career into chaos. That's just plain wrong, as Serini's ordeal graphically illustrates. Still, given people's willingness to accept such allegations at face value, this very disturbing trend is certain to continue.