



LOCAL

## ‘Nowhere is safe.’ Women accuse ex-Planned Parenthood official of sexual harassment

BY MACKENZIE MAYS  
[mmays@fresnobee.com](mailto:mmays@fresnobee.com)

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For years, Pedro Elias was the face of Fresno’s branch of Planned Parenthood.

At news conferences and events, as the director of public affairs, he stood out in a sea of women advocating for reproductive rights: A muscular man often wearing a bright pink Planned Parenthood T-shirt.

But when his employment ended in September after working for the organization since 2000, his colleagues came forward to surmise why.

“He flaunted his advocacy for women while sexually harassing and assaulting multiple women for years,” said Sarah Hutchinson, policy director for ACT for Women and Girls in Visalia.

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## **Women come forward**

Several women, including Hutchinson, told The Bee that they were sexually harassed, assaulted or made uncomfortable by Elias while they were working for Planned Parenthood or for other advocacy groups in the Fresno area.

Hutchinson said her encounter happened after a business meeting in 2016: Elias pinned her arms down “with the force of his body” and kissed her face three times.

“Each time I turned my head so that his lips did not land on my lips,” she said. “I was obviously struggling to get away. I couldn’t move.”

Hutchinson, 32, who said she had looked to Elias as a reproductive rights mentor, called his behavior an “open secret” in the central San Joaquin Valley’s social justice circles and said she knows four other women who have been harassed by him. She said she thought about going forward in the past but worried about how it would affect her work and the work of Planned Parenthood, which already faces intense political criticism. Hutchinson made a public Facebook post about her experience on Sept. 24.



Planned Parenthood Mar Monte's health center, located on Fulton Street.

Mackenzie Mays - mmays@fresnobee.com

“Part of the reason why I never said anything is because I believe in the mission of Planned Parenthood,” she said. “I didn’t go forward because I was afraid to be a pariah...I know this person continues to be welcomed into spaces meant to eradicate his behaviors.”

Another woman who used to do social justice work with Elias said she was stunned to hear Hutchinson’s story because it is so similar to her own.

“He blocked me in a doorway so I couldn’t leave the room. He grabbed me by the shoulders and planted a giant, all consuming kiss on my face,” she told The Bee. “I couldn’t breathe. I was pushing against him but he’s a really big, strong guy, and no matter how hard I pushed, he didn’t budge. He didn’t stop.”

Elias did not respond to requests for comment. According to the Fresno Police Department, no criminal charges have been filed against him and no police reports regarding alleged sexual assault by him have been filed.

## **A betrayal to the community**

The women who spoke to The Bee, many who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, say that Elias knew better. Before his role as director of public affairs, he worked for Planned Parenthood as a community health educator, teaching about consent, among other sex education lessons.

“A man in the women’s movement should know that if he’s actually interested in someone, the best way is to communicate and just tell them,” one woman said. “The fact that he takes another strategy, and is doing it over and over again, shows me he’s a predator hiding in the women’s movement on purpose.”

A spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood Mar Monte – the organization’s largest affiliate in the country, with more than 30 centers in California and Nevada – confirmed that Elias no longer works there, but would not release details.

Liz Figueroa, vice president of external affairs for Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, pointed to the organization’s no tolerance sexual harassment policy and said claims of sexual harassment or assault are taken very seriously.

“We know that nearly 80 percent of all sexual assault and harassment cases go unreported and that it takes courage to come forward. This is a message that our health center staff and health educators consistently communicate to people in the community who come to us for support...” Figueroa said. “As an organization committed to health care, equality and social justice, PPMM does not tolerate any form of sexual harassment. Period.”

None of the women who spoke to The Bee were seeking services from Planned Parenthood or were patients at the organization’s health centers.

According to his LinkedIn account, Elias twice received the Planned Parenthood Mar Monte employee award. From the public’s point of view, he seemed to embody Planned Parenthood’s message.

In September, he took to Facebook to rail against the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, who faced sexual harassment allegations of his own. In August, Elias posted in support of Women’s Equality Day, and in February, he changed his profile picture to a selfie of

him and former Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards, calling her a friend and mentor and “ultimate superstar.”



Fresno advocates gather July 18, 2017 to protest the GOP health-care proposal.

By McClatchy

A woman close to Elias said she believes the women’s accusations – including an account from 15 years ago – and said the stories she’s heard should be reported to the police. She compared Elias to Catholic priests who have been accused of sexually abusing children in their care because his role was one of “power and trust,” and called his alleged actions a betrayal to the community.

“This is someone who represented themselves as an advocate for women, then you find out that they are preying on women. I lump him in with all those other groups of people who have a special area of trust,” she said. “You’re supposed to be able to go to your pastor or priest or teacher or coach and feel safe.”

Planned Parenthood includes “someone forcing you to kiss them” in its definition of sexual assault or abuse. On its website, a page is dedicated to consent, and uses kissing as an example for when to seek it.

“I think one of the things that is so troubling about all of this is that someone who taught men and women about consent didn’t get it,” one woman said. “This is someone who says they’re a voice against oppression. This is a huge violation of that.”

### **‘That can’t be OK anymore’**

Isabel Arroro-Toland, executive director of El Quinto Sol De America, confirmed that Hutchinson told her about Elias years ago, and that there’s “no doubt in my mind” that the allegations are true.

“Planned Parenthood is always attacked for so many other things. It’s so complicated because it’s an advocate doing something like this,” she said. “It’s extremely difficult the person that’s supposed to be advocating for you is hurting you.”

Other women told The Bee that Elias would send them inappropriate text messages or memes at all hours of the night. Some said he would go on sprees of liking every single photo of them on their social media accounts and send links to love songs or virtual bouquets of flowers.

The women who say they rebuffed his advances said he became defensive and hostile. Several women said they warned colleagues –especially young, female volunteers – to steer clear of Elias.

“Then there’s all the shaming he does when you try to call him out,” said a Fresno attorney who said she was subject to Elias’ inappropriate late-night texts. “I had given him a lot more credit because of his employer, so I thought maybe I was reading into it too much.”

Gabriela Valle, who does social justice work in Los Angeles, worked with Elias for nearly a decade. She said she was at a fundraiser in 2015 when several women struck up a conversation about Elias’ behavior.

“I felt like a fool when I found out. It was like something everyone knows. This circle of women was shaking their head like, ‘Uh huh,’” she said. “I could have and should have asked more questions. That can’t be OK anymore. I’m not going to imagine a future where ‘that’s how so and so is.’ No, not anymore.”

Valle said she hopes this is a wake-up call for women everywhere.

“You want to tell yourself you won’t deal with harassment at an organization like this, that’s doing work by, for and on behalf of women,” she said. “But nowhere is safe.”

Since going public with the accusations, Hutchinson has received apologies from colleagues who say they wish they would have done something – but that’s not where the guilt belongs, she said.

“We were emotionally plagued and guilted by his actions,” she said. “When really it was he who should feel guilt and should stop his own behavior.”

*Mackenzie Mays: 559-441-6412, @MackenzieMays*

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