

OPINION: Redemption takes time; the case of Sharik Mendes

In the classic 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Red—played by Morgan Freeman narrates the tale of Andy Dufresne, an innocent man who serves a long prison sentence before escaping. Using the metaphor of geology, Red captures the main theme perfectly and poetically as he intones in that incomparable voice, “Oh, Andy loved geology. I imagine it appealed to his meticulous nature. An ice age here, million years of mountain building there.

Geology is the study of pressure and time. That’s all it takes really, pressure, and time.” The “it” here is redemption. Everyone loves a good comeback story, but much like geology, it takes time.

This would be a good lesson for Sharik Mendes and his supporters to learn. Sharik, a legendary high school running back turned personal trainer, was recently charged with distributing heroin. This came as a shock to many, considering his hands-on approach to helping the youth in his hometown community of New Bedford. His love for young athletes, the game of football, and the city have never been in doubt, but this latest development certainly does more damage to what was already a checkered reputation.

Following the arraignment a local judge ruled that Mendes could continue coaching Pop Warner football while waiting for the slow legal process to run its course. Naturally this decision outraged many citizens and parents who believe that an influential position like coach ought not to be given to a person who has been accused of something as ignominious as heroin dealing.

In response, Mendes' family and friends took to some online threads to remind the masses that people are innocent until proven guilty, everyone makes mistakes, and people deserve second chances.

Both sides have valid points, but in the final analysis the answer appears simple: Sharik shouldn't coach children until his legal affairs are settled, and he has undergone some form of absolution or rehabilitation.

It is true that allegations do not a criminal make. However, the expression "innocent until proven guilty" entails a few assumptions worth noting, namely that the alleged criminal is maintaining their innocence, could have been wrongfully accused, and may be exonerated.

This legal platitude is offered as a reminder that we ought to reserve judgement until official judgement has been passed down. After all, our legal system and our law officers are certainly not infallible. Wise words, no doubt, but the problem for his supporters is reports indicate that Mendes will be pleading guilty to the charges in some type of plea bargain. This vitiates any claims of "innocence." This will shift Mendes from the column of "alleged" to "admitted" and soon thereafter "convicted." The differences between these words matter.

It is possible that his amenability and cooperation will help him avoid jail time, but the fact remains that when all is said and done, Sharik will have earned the factual and dishonorable title of "former heroin dealer." This brings us to the next point about mistakes and second chances. There have been countless instances of athletes, celebrities, and average citizens making colossal transgressions and eventually climbing out of their respective legal quagmires and social ostracism.

But those people all have something in common: a prolonged

period of atonement, usually involving something along the lines of prison time, therapy, counseling, rehabilitation, or community service. It doesn't seem particularly believable that Sharik has experienced some moral epiphany or undergone a major turnaround when his arrest was only weeks ago, and his trial hasn't commenced (not to mention that had the police not have arrested him, he would presumably still be dealing today).

Many of Sharik's supporters believe that denying him the opportunity to coach is in some way cruel or hypocritical. But consider how the same story would unfold if the person in question was not a local figure. Imagine if a soon-to-be convicted drug dealer from Brockton began coaching here as he awaited trial. The blowback would be swift; people would protest.

The only difference in this case is proximal and familial bias.

Also, in order to work with children in Massachusetts, one must pass a CORI check. Open cases show up on these background checks; no other person with a pending case for heroin distribution would be considered for the coaching job. For this reason alone, it would be inappropriate, at least until the legal proceedings are resolved. (It's also worth noting here that Sharik is lucky to have gotten this far in his coaching and training career considering his list of prior charges and convictions—all violent crimes, including kidnapping, assaulting an officer, and assault with a dangerous weapon. The last of these was over a decade ago; clearly Mendes was trying to go straight. He had second, third, and fourth chances already. But now this... How many more chances does a person deserve?

Another concern for local parents could be the potential danger of working with a released drug dealer. If Mendes manages to avoid a prison sentence it will be because he gave

the police valuable information. This could realistically make him the possible target for retribution from some other drug kingpin, which would mean parents would be putting their children in harm's way at every game or practice.

Finally, the nature of the crime itself is playing a role here. Apart from only a few other offenses (violent crimes, crimes against children), opioid distribution is probably the worst illegal act in which a person could participate. We're not talking about a marijuana dealer. Heroin has ravaged much of New England over the past few years, with overdoses, accidents, and deaths occurring with alarming regularity. There are certain crimes that one can forgive easier than others. It is nearly impossible to pardon a person who made a lucrative second job out of disseminating one of the most abominable poisons known to man.

But, of course, people make mistakes. Sharik has made several; this most recent is an enormous one. The only way that he can right his own ship is by a long procession of indemnification, of recompense. There may be a reprieve for him, but he's going to have to earn it. It's going to take time.

Red knew it, too. "Andy Dufresne...he crawled through a river of \$#! and came out clean on the other side..." Mendes can turn this around. People are rooting for him. But he's going to have to make that long crawl through his own river before he finds redemption.