

Victim blaming: from the clinic to the conscience

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After typing a few pieces of information about me into her computer the campus OB/GYN began to ask me general personal health questions.

Did I smoke? Nope.
Did I consume alcohol? Occasionally. I was underage, but I've been taught never to lie to my doctor. I responded truthfully. Maybe a couple times a month and at least four or more drinks.

I knew the effects of alcohol and I was very conscious of the situations I was in when under the

influence, never allowing myself to become uncomfortable.

Yet the advice that followed assumed I didn't take the necessary precautions, and that because of my behavior I could easily become a victim of sexual assault.

I wondered if the same advice was being doled out to young men when answering these questions. Were they lectured on their heightened chances of becoming perpetrators or victims when intoxicated?

Another student, Lysie, (whose last name is withheld due to the personal matter of content) came to me with a very similar problem.

"I was accused of promiscuity

after receiving treatment for what was actually later diagnosed as a hormonal imbalance," Lysie said. "I felt ashamed, embarrassed and judged for something that I hadn't even done."

Although the staff members of the health center undoubtedly mean well, the fact of the matter is that this sort of victim blaming is an all too common occurrence. Thankfully, neither Lysie nor I had been a victim of a sexual assault, but the implication was clear: We were expected to behave in a certain way so that we didn't invite an assault.

If that's the narrative when you're not assaulted, I can only imagine what victims go through.

"There is often a reluctance in reporting," Title IX Coordinator Jeanine Bias Nelson said. "The questioning of events, or acquiring of accountability, can often be interpreted as blaming by the victims."

Researchers say that blaming victims will often "ultimately make victims even less willing to go to police," in a country where sexual assaults are the most under reported crimes.

Rainn.org reports that only 32 percent of rapes are reported with only two percent of rapists actually serving jail time.

I believe young women and men need to be reminded to maintain control, but they must also be

reminded that not everything is always within their control. Sometimes, that control is stolen from them, regardless of their actions.

I also believe that allowing victims to be heard and prosecute their perpetrators often allows victims to take their power back.

Much of the focus this month will be on believing a person when they come forward about being sexually assaulted. But I urge people to also remember to that no woman or man, regardless of dress, state of mind, or sexual orientation, is responsible for their attack or assault.

Responding to a survivor: a personal essay from UPD



CJ Marshall | The Houstonian



KEITH UNDERWOOD
UPD Officer

This subject is one that I don't take lightly, but I regret some personal stumbles I've made when I was confronted with the responsibility of responding to a survivor.

I'd like to share with you when my professional experience started in reference to sexual assault. With this I hope you can see two things: 1) How far society has come in its recognition of how to deal with incidents of sexual assault in the last 15 years and, 2) The unsettling similarity of my story and current response approaches at the same time.

It is important to talk, using honest dialogue, about sexual assault in our community, both as

professionals and citizens, so that when the unthinkable happens we are at least emotionally and mentally prepared to respond to survivors with care and belief, instead of doing what humans do best - acting as if nothing happened at all.

For many in this world, there is still a high level of ignorance about sexual assault and abuse. Most of the public is blind to the burden of dealing with the devastating effects of sexual crimes.

Most may not have a fundamentally life changing experience like I had as a 20 year old U.S. Marine, who was recently graduated from school, and was just hours into arriving in a foreign country to his first duty station.

My first ever real world assignment as a forensic photographer for the Marine Corps was the sexual assault of a Marine's wife.

I understand now how isolated and alone this woman felt. She was thousands of miles from home, on a restricted plot of land we called a base, full of men who looked exactly like the man who just assaulted her. The parallels to a college campus are unmistakable.

She was bruised and dressed in a gown she struggled to stretch over her body because the police had just taken all the clothes she

"My first ever real world assignment as a forensic photographer for the Marine Corps was the sexual assault of a Marine's wife."

had been wearing into evidence.

Those many years ago, I was consumed with my own terror and struggled to remember the process I'd just learned in school of taking the proper photos in the correct sequence. This was further complicated by antiquated equipment forcing me to adjust for strained lighting conditions and taking more photos than I would

have to today.

In a broken voice, I had to ask this young lady who had just been defiled by someone she trusted with her whole heart to expose her battered figure to a perfect stranger in a starched uniform.

Knowing what I know now, I understand how cold and heartless my approach to treating this survivor must have appeared.

The blinding dread of the unknown and the disbelief that such an awful act could be carried out by a fellow human being, a Marine brother no less, must have been so pervasive that the compassion and sorrow I felt for this woman could not have been more disguised.

I treated that scene with oblivious military efficiency. Now, being part of the paramilitary community of policing I have too often seen the same cold approach to survivors.

This is not out of malice, but more often out of ignorance about how to deal with the fear and confusion created by sexual acts of violence.

The solution, it seems, has to be preparing for such encounters with healthy dialogue and a genuine effort toward creating a

trusting environment where we treat survivors with respect and dignity instead of like pieces to a crime puzzle.

I can assure you that Sam Houston's police department is committed to responding to cases of sexual assault with the survivor's needs as the first priority and we doing everything we can to provide a safe environment for survivors. We are committed to listening and inspiring a sense of belief and understanding.

George Washington said, "In executing the duties of my present important station, I can promise nothing but purity of intentions, and, in carrying these into effect, fidelity and diligence."

I'm not as eloquent as General Washington, so I will simply give you my pledge, and hope you will do the same with me today and into the future...to start by believing.

#StartByBelieving: False reports by the numbers

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There is a common myth that a lot of reports of sexual assault are "false." However, studies show that only between two and eight percent of people that report sexual assault have false claims.

"A lot of times when people think reports might be false, they don't really believe what that claim

is," Jeanine Bias Nelson, SHSU director of equity and inclusion and Title IX coordinator, said. "That doesn't mean that report is false just because you don't agree with it."

Because of the trauma that comes with being sexually assaulted, some victims wait to report the crime. Others may have inconsistencies in their statements, or decide not to cooperate with investigators. If law enforcement officers are not properly trained to

understand these behaviors, those reports may be classified as false.

Some of these "false" reports might actually be "baseless" reports. A baseless report is one in which it is determined that the incident doesn't meet the legal criteria, but is presumed truthful.

"It also doesn't mean that just because they're claiming sexual assault that possibly harassment or other misconduct issues didn't occur," Nelson said. "It might not rise to the level of assault, but it

could be other things that happen at that time where the report itself isn't false."

Even before law enforcement becomes involved, most survivors will tell someone close to them about the assault, which is why the Start By Believing campaign adopted by SHSU is so important, according to Nelson.

"Start by Believing is really about bystander intervention," Nelson said. "The first person a victim or survivor tells is not going

to be me or the police department. It's going to be a friend, classmate or family member. You are that first person that can really help that victim or survivor where they're going to report forward."

After a survivor tells somebody about their sexual assault, Nelson urges that a friend, family member or classmate encourage the victim or survivor to get the services or resources they need and not to judge them.

Sexual assault in the LGBT community: My perspective

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Sexual assault is a very serious issue within the LGBT community, but many members are unwilling to be out and open, not only about their assault, but about their sexuality.

As a result, most sexual assaults go unreported, especially when it involves women who have sex with women. What's more, our society is just starting to work on de-stigmatizing the idea that there are male survivors of sexual assault, let alone gay survivors.

One major problem is that the LGBT community is hypersexualized by society, leading many to believe victims are responsible for their assaults. What's more, LGBT people face hate violence as a result of their sexual orientation, which often manifests as a sexual assault.

I have some personal experience in this area. Before I came out, I was dating a boy. When I decided to be honest with him about my sexual orientation, he called me a "dyke" and told me he'd "turn me straight again" before raping me.

I was just 17.

Advocates say sexual assault

in the LGBT community is often rendered invisible or dismissed outright, even though statistics show members are raped just as much, or more than heterosexuals.

According to recent reports, approximately one in eight lesbian women and nearly half of bisexual women experience rape in their lifetime, and statistics likely increase when a broader definition of sexual assault is used.

Experts say nearly half of bisexual men and four in 10 gay men have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime, and though statistics regarding rape vary, advocates say

it is likely that the rate is higher or comparable to heterosexual men.

As with most hate-based violence, experts say transgender individuals are the most likely to be affected in the LGBT community. A staggering 64 percent of transgender people have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime.

One specific incident that stands out is the rape and murder of a transgender man named Brandon Teena, whose life and death were documented in the film Boys Don't Cry. Teena was a transgender man who was raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska. His story

highlights the broader systematic problems plaguing the LGBT community when it comes to crimes of this nature.

So, as you participate in the many events that are being held this month to raise awareness and to provide support to survivors, don't forget that we are part of that reality. The assaults within the LGBT community must be a part of this discussion. Sexual predators are dangerous to ALL of us.