

Community must unite to fight growing sexual assault issues

JESSICA LABENBERG



Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) comes around every April. SAAM reminds us how far we have come in our fight against sexual violence

and unites us as a community to take on the work that remains to be done. Most importantly, every April SAAM reminds us to celebrate and honor the spirit of the survivors in our communities.

Three years ago, a survivor chose to press charges against four football players from Vanderbilt University who sexually assaulted her. Over two years later she bravely testified against her abusers in a very public trial. Twice. And she was in court to hear a jury deliver a guilty verdict. Twice. She confronted her abuser and told her story publicly. Twice. Once she heard him convicted of four counts of aggravated rape, and the second time she heard him convicted of one count of aggravated rape.

As I followed the trial the second time and heard the verdict a second time, I was overcome with a feeling best described as "disappointed relief." Relief that our community is holding an abuser accountable. Disappointment that a survivor was re-traumatized in the process — a process she will likely endure again as her other

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rapists are brought to trial.

In the survivor's own words, "I deserved better. Victims of sexual assault deserve better. Our community deserves better." As a victim advocate at the Sexual Assault Center and member of this community, I wholeheartedly agree. We all deserve better.

Our children deserve to live in a community committed to prevention education and teaching about healthy relationships. They deserve to live in a community that is free of rape myths, because it is only by understanding the facts associated with sexual abuse that we can protect our children from sexual abuse. A community that understands that 90 percent of child sexual abuse is committed by someone within the child's circle of trust, not by a stranger lurking in the bushes.

We deserve to live in a community where consent is openly discussed and understood. Where no amount of alcohol equals consent. Where the absence of a "no" does not mean "yes." Where the only thing that equals consent is a freely given, clearly stated, enthusiastic "yes!" We deserve to live in a community where we feel safe to be active bystanders and intervene in situations where we suspect someone

does not have the ability to give consent. Where we are educated and armed with the knowledge and skills to address situations that appear unsafe, and to take action in those situations without fear of persecution and alienation by our peers.

We deserve to live in a community that understands that sexual violence affects all of us, regardless of our age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion or education.

A community that understands that rape is an act of power and control and is not about sexual gratification. A community that understands that while alcohol is the most commonly used drug in drug-facilitated sexual assaults, consumption of alcohol does not cause an abuser to rape. We deserve a community that supports each and every decision a survivor makes for him or herself. A community that understands there is no "right" or "wrong" decision, just the best decision for each individual survivor.

In the spirit of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, I propose we commit to dedicating the rest of 2016 to becoming the community we all deserve.

For more information about the Sexual Assault Center, please visit their website at www.sacenter.org.

Jessica Labenberg is the victim advocate for the Sexual Assault Center in Nashville.