

Could bystanders have prevented Vanderbilt rape?

Stacey Barchenger, sbarchenger@tennessean.com 6:02 a.m. CDT June 26, 2016

There's something missing from the national dialogue comparing sexual assault cases involving the attacks on unconscious women at Vanderbilt University and Stanford University.

It's time to scrutinize the role of other people. The bystanders.

The night a woman was sexually assaulted behind a trash bin at Stanford in January 2015, two men riding by on bikes intervened and tackled the assailant as he fled. The victim later, in a statement that went viral, called them heroes.

The night police say a woman was raped by four men inside a Vanderbilt University dorm three years ago, at least six men saw her partially clothed in the dorm or, worse yet, saw graphic pictures or video of the assault. One testified he saw the unconscious woman and four football players in the dorm, but tried to sleep through it.

No heroes intervened for her.

Mack Prioleau, a former roommate of Brandon Vandenburg, Buy Photo

Mack Prioleau, a former roommate of Brandon Vandenburg, testifies during Vandenburg's retrial June 17, 2016, in Nashville. Prioleau said he saw four football players and an unconscious woman in his dorm room, but tried to go back to sleep and did not report it. (Photo: Samuel M. Simpkins / The Tennessean)

Instead, the Vanderbilt teammates deleted pictures. Destroyed phones. Orchestrated a cover-up. Lied to the woman, who did not remember the rape. And as Deputy District Attorney General Tom Thurman said during his opening statement in last week's trial of one of the men, 23-year-old Brandon Vandenburg, they almost got away with it.

"I think the role of bystander in any act that requires intervention, whether it be an emergency or a health crisis, is critical," said Sharon Travis, prevention and community outreach specialist at Nashville's Sexual Assault Center. Travis leads bystander training courses.

To be fair, Travis said since the Vanderbilt case first made headlines, demand for bystander training has increased and more schools are offering those programs. Vanderbilt is among them, requiring bystander intervention training for student leaders and fraternity members.

Alaleh Kianerci, a Santa Clara, Calif., deputy district attorney who worked on the case at Stanford, said it best at a news conference in 2015. It was after charges were filed against swimmer Brock Turner, whose six-month jail sentence earlier this month prompted outcry and criticism it was too lenient. Kianerci praised the two bicyclists who intervened as taking heroic actions.

"Luckily for the victim in this case there were two Good Samaritans who were in the right place at the right time," she said. "And more importantly, they did the right thing. That's the message that needs to be sent to the community. Don't just stand by if you see something inappropriate. If you see something, say something."

'Bro Code' inaction in Vandy rape case sparks anger

Travis offered the following tips so that everyone — including you and I — can feel comfortable as active bystanders:

Pay attention to your surroundings: "I think the thing that stands out with Stanford is that people noticed what was going on," Travis said. "We don't know how many people rode by and didn't pay attention and didn't see."

Decide ahead of time you will be the kind of person who speaks up when you see something wrong.

If you see something, consider these options: distract (draw either person's attention away to try and separate them), delegate (go get help or call police, for example) or direct (approach the situation head-on and say something).

All of that with personal safety in mind, of course. No one is saying you should tackle attackers. Travis suggested the Stanford bystanders could have called police or literally shone a light on the attack there to stop it. This isn't only about college students. Everyone can speak up, and not only to prevent criminal conduct but to help in any potential emergency.

Consider the myriad of other options — the simplest, a phone call to 911 — and the massive impact it can have.

Juries in 3 Vanderbilt trials: Alcohol not a defense to rape

What if one of the men who saw the Vanderbilt student partially clothed and unconscious after the rape in the dorm on June 23, 2013, called police?

Maybe the investigation would have started immediately, instead of three days later when campus police happened across suspicious activity on surveillance video. Days sooner, before Vandenburg lied and told the woman she got drunk and he took care of her. Before he could have sex with her and ejaculate, actions prosecutors argued were to cover up evidence.

Maybe the victim would have gone for a medical exam the same day, when forensic evidence could still be collected.

Maybe Vandenburg would not have had time to ask his friends to return videos he sent them or go to California to destroy his friend's phone.

Maybe it would have saved a 21-year-old college student, busy balancing extracurricular activities like the dance team and coursework in neuroscience, from being betrayed by the man she was dating, the man she trusted.

Or maybe it would have prevented her from finding out she was raped because a police detective told her they'd found photographs and videos of what three juries have now said really happened.

And what if someone tried to help before she was even carried into that dorm room?

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Resources

Sharon Travis at the Sexual Assault Center recommended the following programs to learn more about being an active bystander. To contact the Sexual Assault Center for more information, call 615-259-9055. The agency also has a crisis and support line for victims and their families at 800-879-1999.

The Green Dot is a program that focuses on training peers to intervene to stop violence.

The Step UP! program was developed at the University of Arizona in partnership with the NCAA.