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Sexual assault on campus: Culture change 101

By **PAM LOUWAGIE**, Star Tribune

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Tyler Jones was tipping back a couple of beers with friends at a Dinkytown bar when he suddenly had to take a stand.

"Hey, see that girl over there?" Jones recalled an acquaintance asking, nodding toward a woman he wanted to take home. "She's almost drunk. Not quite drunk enough. ... What shot should I buy her?"

There was a time, Jones says, when he might have laughed off the remark. Not anymore.

"You want to buy her something really strong to like, basically knock her out?" Jones, a University of Minnesota senior, recalled saying. "Man, that's not right. That's rape. That's sexual assault."

The acquaintance looked stunned. "Whatever," he mumbled, and walked away.

It was one moment at one bar. But it's also a sign of a big shift in strategy on campuses trying to tackle a culture that some say tolerates sexual assault. Instead of teaching women not to walk alone at night or to carry Mace, some colleges are trying something much harder -- changing college men. Jones, fresh from sex assault prevention training, is in the vanguard of the movement.

"The fact of the matter is that prevention comes down to, largely, males. Because males are primarily the ones perpetrating these crimes," said Lauren Pilnick, sexual violence education coordinator at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

More than one in five female students reported that they had experienced an actual or attempted sexual assault, according to a 2007 survey at 14 Minnesota colleges and universities. Nationally, one group estimates the ratio is as high as one in four female students while at college.

Colleges are turning to programs that strive to sensitize college men to sexual misconduct, and there is evidence of some success. First-year fraternity men who saw a specific rape prevention program were nearly half as likely to commit a sexually coercive act as those who didn't, according to a 2007 study co-authored by John Foubert, a professor who developed the nonprofit One in Four, a group aimed at changing male behavior.

Of about 80 campuses receiving Department of Justice grants to address sexual assault

and other issues, about 20 have full-fledged men's programs, while almost all the others are on their way to starting them, according to one administrator. In Minnesota, schools including the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, St. Cloud State University, Minnesota State University, Mankato, and Carleton College are starting men's groups or have them in place.

Some male students at Bemidji State University are involved in a community men's group that has met on campus.

The efforts aren't limited to schools. The Army announced a program in September encouraging soldiers to "intervene, act, and motivate" if they see signs of activity that could lead to sexual assault.

There has been "an interest in getting men involved, men being interested in being involved and a feeling amongst people who had worked in this arena that it was about time," said Frank Jewell, co-coordinator of the Minnesota Men's Action Network, a group initiated by the state Department of Health a few years ago to prevent sexual and domestic violence.

No easy task

Male groups are not a new idea, but colleges and universities are putting new emphasis on them. Getting college men to talk seriously and think about how sexual assault is portrayed around them is no easy task, though.

Jill Lipski Cain leads that conversation about five times a month, sometimes in front of Jones' fraternity. The violence prevention education coordinator at the University of Minnesota's Aurora Center, which focuses on sexual assault, she opens the discussion with a slide show of jaw-dropping statistics, images and sounds.

One magazine advertisement features a gaunt teenage-looking girl in a bikini top, a tube of perfume placed in her cleavage. "Apply generously to your neck," the text reads, "so he can smell the scent while you shake your head 'no.'"

One after another, more ads flash: Women with short skirts and spread legs, muscular men restraining women, scantily clad women posed as if dead.

Overhead, music thumped while the lyrics coached, "Pop a little champagne and a couple E's. Slip it in her bubbly."

Lipski Cain asked: "Is it really sex that is being sold or are there elements of rape in it that's presented to you as sex?"

The answer seemed obvious. But the definition of what constitutes sexual assault wasn't so clear. Students are told they must get consent before having sex. And under state law, someone who is incapacitated can't give that consent, violence prevention leaders said.

Men and women also use different communication styles, educators point out. A woman may not say no to sex, but may freeze up in response to a guy's advances, for instance. That is communicating "no," they say.

The key is to always ask, educators say.

And then there's language some guys use: "banging" their girlfriends, for instance.

"How do you think perpetrators talk about sex?" Lipski Cain asked. "What are we tolerating when we just let a comment or a joke slip by?"

Rob Leeson, a sophomore fraternity member, found the discussion enlightening. "It kind of opens your eyes to what our culture is like," he said. "You kind of pay more attention to those little things you never thought about before."

Expecting challenges

At St. Cloud State, a group of eight male volunteers are committed to trying to make other guys think. Once a week for three weeks they huddled in the basement of the campus Women's Center for training.

Chuck Derry, co-coordinator with Jewell of the Minnesota Men's Action Network, led the training and told the men they are in a unique position to bring about change, but they should expect to be challenged. Men will dwell on scenarios where women seem to be asking for sex, he said. If a woman is dressed suggestively, drinking heavily and rubbing against men on a dance floor, some men will say she's stupid to expect that guys won't try to have sex with her.

Ben Hedlund, a graduate student and Male Peer Education Program Coordinator, suggested turning the logic around in that case: "So you're telling me that a woman is stupid not to think of you as a vulture. Are you telling me that you're a vulture, too?"

Derry told the group they'd have to prepare answers for all types of arguments from men who are reticent to believe the sex assault statistics.

"They're getting all these messages that say that women are bitches and ho's and sexual objects," Derry said. The challenge is to get men to understand the ties between casual comments and a tolerance for violence, he said.

No overnight changes

For Jones, who is helping start a similar campus men's group, the spur to action came partly because his sister arrived as a freshman on the University of Minnesota this fall.

As Jones grew up, his mother let him know that she disapproved of jokes and comments that degraded women. But when he got to college, it was easy to just act like one of the

guys and let comments slip by. When the staff at the Aurora Center approached him about starting a men's group, he decided it would also be a good opportunity to promote change and fight stereotypes about fraternities.

And he was exactly the type of guy the staff was looking for: popular in the Greek community, a leader in Delta Tau Delta, someone with instant credibility among other guys.

"When I talk about it, every once in a while people still kind of laugh it off," Jones said. But he said many guys tell him they respect what he's doing.

He understands he won't be changing the world overnight.

"It's going to take time. It's going to take commitment," he said. "Every once in a while if I can get one person, that's one more person that didn't think that way before."

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