

## **For a Victim of Rape, Silence is No Benefit**

**By Donna L. Potts**

In the fall of 1981, I left home to attend college. I was delighted when, after class one day, one of my professors asked me about my favorite writers, then suggested I might like to work on a special project. After that, I went to his office once a week to help him.

Near the semester's end, my father committed suicide. My professors were notified, and when I returned to campus, my mentor called to offer condolences and invite me to dinner with his family. When he asked me to come back the next morning for coffee, I immediately said yes. When I arrived, he invited me in, and as he closed the door behind me, he mentioned that his family had left town for a shopping trip. He then raped me, and on my way out, said: "By the way, I have a lot of power in the department, so it won't do any good for you to say anything about this. Anyway, it's never happened before."

Back in my apartment that day, I curled up in a fetal position on a black vinyl couch for hours, until my boyfriend (who didn't know I'd been raped) suggested taking me to a university psychiatrist. When I tried to explain to the man on call that weekend what had happened, he said dismissively, "But I'm sure a lot of men are attracted to you," then offered to prescribe antidepressants. I had a fleeting fear that he was planning to drug me before he raped me, and I left his office as fast as I could.

When I tried to tell my mom, she was too absorbed in her own grief to listen. And I was afraid to admit to my friends what had happened. Having been raised fundamentalist, I'd been taught that women, by dressing or behaving provocatively, were largely responsible for their rapes. So in addition to my guilt over my father's death, I also felt responsible for making my otherwise irreproachable professor cross boundaries he'd never crossed before. After all, the other students gushed about how patient and kind he was, and what a wonderful dad he'd make.

After the rape, I moved in with my boyfriend, who gradually became abusive. When I finally found the courage to leave, I ended up at a women's shelter in St. Louis, where I was asked to fill out a questionnaire and was given information about various kinds of violence toward women. My small repayment to the shelter for helping me break away was to become a rape, abuse, and incest hotline volunteer. I soon learned that rape is

not about sex—it's about control—and as I took phone calls from women at all hours, what had initially seemed like my own private hell quickly became crowded with fellow victims.

Over the next several years, I finished my degree, then got a Ph.D. and eventually a professorship. In those days, rape awareness was just beginning to emerge on college campuses. It took me 10 years to use the word "rape" to describe what had happened to me, but as more women entered the profession—some of whom had also had encounters with male academics who felt entitled to exploit their students—I gradually found the courage to go public. And I felt more comfortable addressing the issue of rape in academe.

In 2002, I taught J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, a story of rape and denial in which a professor harasses, stalks, and rapes one of his students, but refuses to admit it to himself afterward.

In the classroom discussion that ensued, some of my students argued that because his victim in the novel doesn't say "no," and because she doesn't physically resist him, what happens between them doesn't really count as rape. As soon as I suggested that she might have been afraid to say "no," a small voice seconded me: "But just because she didn't say 'no' doesn't mean she wanted it to happen." The speaker, a student who had never before spoken in class, or even made eye contact with me, suddenly volunteered that when she was in high school, a teacher had locked her in a room and assaulted her.

For that young woman, one of the worst parts of her continuing ordeal was that she never got the chance to say anything on her own behalf at the trial. Likewise, she told the class, the worst thing about the story we were discussing was that the professor "gets to do all that talking in his own defense, but the girl he raped never gets to say anything again."

For that student, the opportunity to say something in a public space, and be affirmed for doing so, seemed therapeutic. She grew from a sullen student into a joyful learner, and even brought us cupcakes on her birthday—maybe as a way of saying thank you for listening to her the way nobody else had.

It's been nearly 30 years now since I was raped, and in that time, I've heard countless stories of sexual assaults on university campuses. Whether rapes are committed by professors or students, the pattern is the same: The chosen victim is particularly

vulnerable, isolated in one way or another from her peers, and the perpetrator is a repeat offender.

At a recent meeting of the American Association of University Professors, I heard a story from a colleague about a professor who had raped an international student on his campus. The student eventually notified university authorities, who followed university procedure and terminated the professor. Although I had already guessed the outcome, I asked anyway: "Was the professor ever charged with rape?" As I expected, the answer was no. Internal procedures were followed, records were sealed to protect the student's privacy, and the professor was gone—problem solved.

However, the drawback to such internal procedures, which are standard not only at many private universities but at state universities as well, is that the rapists are then free to seek employment elsewhere. All it takes is silent complicity and a few glowing letters of recommendation. And the message to students is still, "It won't do any good for you to say anything."

Because universities have a vested interest in protecting their reputations, victims of sexual assault are all too often silenced. Although there are now rape-awareness posters on most campuses, they're more likely to emphasize the responsibility of the victim to prevent rape rather than the roles of bystanders, roommates, friends, faculty, and staff in responding to rape. Even when victims report rape to campus police or university authorities, criminal charges, or even internal sanctions, are seldom forthcoming.

As faculty members, we can help change the outcomes. We can ensure that students receive up-to-date information about rape rather than simply a list of phone numbers to call after a rape has been committed. Given the many public misconceptions about rape, faculty and staff would benefit from such information, too—whether through administrative memos or in training sessions. We can incorporate into our handbooks clear procedures that recommend reporting sexual assaults to local police, to make sure that students—and faculty and staff members—get the message. And above all, when our students report sexual assault, we can listen and encourage them to act.

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