November 2010

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Behind Closed Doors

The Silence of Sexual Assault

By Kaitlin McKinney  Photography Annie McGuire  Design Kyli Hassebrock

“I woke up, and he was gone,” Chelsea recalls. “I was naked in his bed, and I just remember feeling really confused... like, ‘what the hell happened last night?’... I knew exactly what happened. I just didn’t understand how.”

It didn’t take Chelsea long to find her clothes, wrinkled and lying by the door. Her purse lay beside her clothes, and most of its contents were spilled. “The first thing I wanted to do was get my clothes on and grab my purse,” she explains. “I just felt so vulnerable.” After dressing and picking up her pieces of gum, random coins and ChapStick from the floor, Chelsea quickly walked towards the door. Instead of walking out, she stopped at the door and looked around one last time. Photographs hung on the walls and a single trophy rested on the desk. “I just stared at the pictures he had with his parents and friends thinking, ‘How can someone like him do this?’”

Chelsea, who only wants to be identified by her first name, left the bedroom and found the apartment empty, which made for a less humilitating escape. She exited through the front door and tried to never look back.

Chelsea’s situation is very common among college students, but at what point is a situation like this considered sexual assault? Keep in mind, not every sexual situation can be labeled with a clear definition. Ray Rodriguez, health promotion coordinator at Iowa State, stresses the importance of agreement between both individuals when it comes to sex and other sexual activities. “If it’s against your will, without your consent, or [if you’re] unable to freely give consent, it’s sexual assault. Period.”

It is commonly misunderstood that there needs to be a verbal ‘no.’ “It could be any other verbal or non-verbal indication that someone wanted to stop. Pushing away, breaking eye contact; that’s stepping back. It doesn’t matter what was said,” Rodriguez explains. “The absence of a ‘no’ is not a ‘yes.’”

Chelsea only told a few close friends about what happened and when she did, she didn’t know exactly how to define her situation. “I don’t really remember what happened that night,” she says. “I know
we were all drinking, then the two of us went in his room, and it just kinda happened.”

This can be a very controversial issue, especially when alcohol is involved. Rodriguez says 95 percent of sexual assault occurs when one or both individuals are under the influence of alcohol. Today, there is a conventional image our culture gives off regarding college life, so it doesn’t make Chelsea’s situation unusual. To students, party hopping seems to be fun only when it’s accompanied by alcohol. Think about a typical night on Welch Avenue. It’s not unusual to see girls with their clear water bottles filled with colorful, fruity concoctions, guys ditching the books and walking around with backpacks filled with Keystone or Bud Light. Alcohol seems to be the common ‘go-to’ in order to feel loosened up.

Nevertheless, party hopping with friends can be exciting, but is it still fun when you’re with a person who can barely stand and is slurring their words? Some people tend to feel obligated to help them because of the vulnerable state they are in. In addition to alcohol, recreational drugs can also be a component in sexual assault. ‘Date rape’ drugs are a way to affect an individual’s ability to fight back, but are generally less prevalent on college campuses.

The three most common drugs used in America today are Rohypnol (roo-fies), Ketamine and gamma hydroxybutric acid (GHB). These drugs have different effects on the body but all generate serious consequences for the individual who are given the drug. Rohypnol, despite the comedic results it may have had on four middle-aged men in Vegas who woke up with a hangover, it provokes scary repercussions. According to WomensHealth.gov, this drug is not legal in America; it is generally smuggled in from places where it is legal, like Europe and Mexico. Rohypnol takes roughly 30 minutes to fully affect the body and limits the ability to stand as well as the ability to speak clearly. Ketamine works in as little as 10 to 15 minutes. The drug causes impaired motor functions and numbness. In some cases, the individual may be aware of what is happening but may be unable to move. In other cases, the period of being drugged is completely forgotten. GHB works just as fast as Ketamine but produces more serious effects. GHB slows the heartbeat, and can cause comas and even death. Ketamine and GHB are legal in the U.S. for medicinal purposes only.

Although recreational drugs are dangerous, in actuality, only 1-2 percent of sexual violence occurs as the result of their use. With this, the issue of consent is affected mostly by alcohol.

Tyler, junior in business, claims he drinks to feel more comfortable. “I drink to have fun, yeah, but it also helps me loosen up,” he admits. “It makes it a lot easier to talk to girls.” Tyler also points out that he won’t stop a girl who comes on to him if she has been drinking. “If a girl is texting me and flirting, and I know she’s been drinking, I’m not going to push her away because I think it’s ‘wrong’... [solely] because she’s drunk. It’s her who is making the choices.”

At what point does the flirting and kissing heighten and progress into assault? “If a woman agrees to kiss, she agrees to kiss. If she then agrees [to touching], she’s agreed to that. But, agreeing to kiss is not agreeing to intercourse,” Rodriguez answers. He strongly reminds again, “The absence of a ‘no’ is not a ‘yes.’”

Men can be victims of sexual assault as well. Interestingly enough, men have generally been more likely to step up about their experiences with assault than women have. Although it does happen that women are the abusers, more than 95 percent of reported cases show men committing assault against women. Statistically, 11 out of 12 men have not committed assault, but the men who have are usually consecutive offenders. It should be noted that
ONE IN TWELVE COLLEGE MALES ADMIT TO HAVING COMMITTED ACTS THAT MEET THE LEGAL DEFINITION OF RAPE OR ACQUAINTANCE RAPE.
the statistics are based on reported cases of sexual assault. Many cases go unreported. It should also be acknowledged that sexual assault also occurs outside of heterosexual relationships. Members of the LGBT community deal with these issues as well.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE BEEN ASSAULTED

Dealing with sexual assault can be uncomfortable, but it is important not to keep it to yourself. Experts suggest talking with someone, even if it is just a family member or close friend. And if a victim wishes to seek professional help, Iowa State and Story County offer resources. Students and others can contact the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) through Story County, which can be contacted by dialing 29-ALERT. This activates police and medical response as well as ACCESS (Assault Care Center Extending Shelter and Support), a Story County organization. Confidentiality is taken very seriously and identities are protected as much as possible. From there, a victim will then get to decide what steps to take next, whether that is filing charges or just filling out a report.

Filling out a report and filing charges are two different things, and many often confuse them. Filling out a report keeps the assaulter’s name on file. The assaulter will not be notified the victim filled out the report. Filing charges, however, will be less confidential, and the assaulter could potentially face federal charges.

"Who knows if he did this to [other girls]? It is possible, since he got away with it with me, he could have done this to another girl," Chelsea says. "Looking back, I wish I would have come forward about what happened. I think it would have [helped]."