

Campus Rape Victims: A Struggle For Justice

Copyright ©2010 National Public Radio®. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

Heard on Morning Edition

February 24, 2010 - RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

We're going to spend the next few minutes on a problem college campuses have been facing for a long time now, yet the statistics continue to be chilling. A study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that one out of five college women will be sexually assaulted. Usually, there's alcohol involved.

NPR's investigative unit teamed up with journalists at the Center for Public Integrity for this look at how schools - and the government agency that oversees them - handle these cases. NPR's Joseph Shapiro reports.

JOSEPH SHAPIRO: When a woman is sexually assaulted on a college campus, her most common reaction is to keep it quiet. Laura Dunn says she stayed quiet about what happened in April of 2004, her freshman year at the University of Wisconsin.

Ms. LAURA DUNN: I always thought that rape was when, you know, someone got attacked by a stranger and you had to fight back.

SHAPIRO: That night, Dunn was drinking so many raspberry vodkas that they cut her off at the frat house party. Still, she knew and trusted the two men who took her back to a house. That's where she says they raped her as she passed in and out of consciousness.

Ms. DUNN: I guess I didn't want to believe what actually happened.

SHAPIRO: It just didn't make sense with the way she saw her life. For one thing, she had a boyfriend. They'd been dating for four years.

Ms. DUNN: We were getting close to marriage. We had been waiting together, and so I was still a virgin, and it just didn't fit with what I wanted my life to be and what I'd planned, in my life, to be. So, I just kind of pushed it to the side; said, you know, it's this bad incident that happened, and it was just a mistake. You know, we were all drunk and I just chose to like, put it there.

SHAPIRO: She focused on her schoolwork, but she couldn't sleep. She lost weight. She broke up with her boyfriend without ever telling him about the attack. And she didn't report it.

Fifteen months later, she was sitting in class. The professor was talking about how in wartime, rape is used as a weapon of terror.

Ms. DUNN: And this professor, who I'll forever respect, stopped the lecture and said, you know, I want to talk about rape on this campus.

SHAPIRO: The professor said that over 80 percent of victims stay silent.

Ms. DUNN: And she said, I want you to know that this has happened in my class to my students, and that there is something you can do about it, and there is someone you can talk about it with. And she told me about the dean of students. And after hearing, you know, about rape, I just decided, you know, I know it was rape, and now I know that there's something I can do about it. And so the moment that lecture let up, I walked across to the dean of students' office and I reported that day.

SHAPIRO: We'll tell you what happened to Laura Dunn in a moment.

But first, it helps to know something about the history of how colleges and universities got their current day responsibility to investigate and prevent sexual assaults. It starts with a crime in April of 1986.

Ms. CONNIE CLERY: What happened to Jeanne was so amazingly unreal.

SHAPIRO: Connie Clery is the mother of Jeanne Clery.

Ms. CLERY: She was in the right place, where she should have been - in her own bed, in the dorm at 6 o'clock in the morning, fast asleep. There were three automatically locking doors that should have been locked, which she thought were locked. And she didn't have an enemy in the world. And Lehigh was such a safe-looking place, you know?

SHAPIRO: Jeanne Clery was 19, a freshman at Lehigh University. A stranger he was a student raped, tortured and strangled her. In their grief, Connie Clery and her husband devoted the rest of their lives to making college campuses safer.

Ms. CLERY: So if it happened to Jeanne, it could certainly happen to somebody else. And that's why I decided I had to do something to save others from such a horror.

SHAPIRO: Connie's husband, Howard, sold his successful business to underwrite their work. Connie, who'd been terrified of speaking in public, went on TV morning shows and testified before lawmakers.

Their idea was simple: Force schools to disclose all crime that happens on campus. Then students and their parents would be informed. And the campus would get safer because under public scrutiny, college presidents would have no choice but to get serious about preventing crime.

Twenty years ago, Congress passed that disclosure law, now known as the Jeanne Clery Act.

There's been success. Over a recent 10-year period, violent crime on college campuses dropped by 9 percent.

Ms. CLERY: The Department of Education has been a disappointment to me.

SHAPIRO: But for advocates like Connie Clery, there have been shortcomings, too. The U.S. Department of Education regulates schools under the Clery Act, but it's fined offending schools just six times. And that gets us back to Laura Dunn's case.

She counted on the Department of Education for help.

Ms. DUNN: Dear Ms. Dunn, on August 8, 2006, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights received your complaint of discrimination on the basis of sex filed against the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

SHAPIRO: By the time Dunn reported to campus officials, one of the men she accused had graduated; the other said the sex was consensual. The University of Wisconsin took nine months to investigate, then decided against punishment.

As a last resort, Dunn asked the U.S. Department of Education to find that the university had failed in its responsibility to act promptly, and to end the sexual harassment she faced being on campus with her alleged attacker.

This anti-harassment law is among the strongest tools for enforcement at the Education Department. Few women know to use it, and when they do, the department rarely acts. Between 1998 and 2008, it ruled against

just five universities out of 24 complaints. That's according to records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by the Center for Public Integrity. There was no punishment in those cases - simply guidance on how to improve campus procedures.

Presented with those findings, Russlynn Ali, the assistant secretary for civil rights, says her office is stepping up outreach to students so they know their rights, and assistance to schools so they know their responsibilities.

Ms. RUSSLYNN ALI (Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Department of Education): We want them to get training, we want to provide some help so that the adults and the students alike can ensure that this plague - it's really become a plague in this country - begins to diminish.

SHAPIRO: The Education Department official says she's willing to take steps not used by her predecessors: to withdraw federal funding from offending schools, and refer cases to the Department of Justice for possible prosecution.

SOUNDBITE OF WRITING ON BLACKBOARD

Laura Dunn is a teacher now. She writes the next day's lesson on the blackboard.

Ms. DUNN: Most days, we'll have students who will be able to find interior angles of triangles.

SHAPIRO: Two years after Dunn graduated, a thick document came in the mail to her apartment. It was the finding by the Department of Education.

Ms. DUNN: I went straight to the conclusion.

SHAPIRO: It said the University of Wisconsin - despite taking nine months on the case - had acted properly. Defeated, Dunn didn't read on. She threw the papers on the top of a pile of other documents in the corner of her bedroom.

Ms. DUNN: You know, I could've fought it again and it could've appealed, but that would've meant I would've had to read it. And at that point in my life, just reading it - I just didn't even want to. I did not want to read the ugly things that people said.

SHAPIRO: But Laura Dunn is no longer silent. She's a leader in a national grassroots campaign to get rape survivors to speak out in public.

Joseph Shapiro, NPR News.

MONTAGNE: To learn more about victims' rights and find resources for campus safety, visit NPR.org.

(Soundbite of music)

MONTAGNE: This is NPR News.

Copyright © 2010 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.