

Forum: Deploying compassion to combat sex assaults on college campuses

By Janet Jensen

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I am a rape survivor. It was an event that changed me forever, because my attacker did more than brutalize me that afternoon in Fort Worth, Tex. He stole a part of my life. Nearly 35 years later, I can still play the movie in my mind, moment by moment by moment. I can even hear the sound track, with the chirping of birds in the distance and the squishing noise of my face being pressed into the grass.

It wasn't only the attack that changed me. It was also the disturbing behavior of the responding police officers and medical personnel who clearly had no training in how to deal with rape victims — who had no sense at all of how devastating they can be.

I have made it my mission ever since that day to try to change a culture of indifference and even tolerance of sexual assault to a culture based on empathy and compassion.

My work has focused on young people, since this is a lesson that must be acquired early in life. But as the work has gone forward, I've learned something else: It is not just sexual assaults that we must try to prevent, but other forms of physical and mental abuse like harassment, hazing and bullying. They, too, are the consequences of an unfeeling culture. And they, too, must be counteracted by a culture of empathy and compassion.

I suspect that there are many people reading these words who know exactly what I'm writing about. Studies show that one in four women between the ages of 18 and 32 has been assaulted in some way.

I was proud to bring The Jensen Project to the University of New Haven, and I have been inspired by the response. Dr. Steven H. Kaplan, the university's president, was a strong backer from the start. Faculty members started getting on board after their students urged them to participate. And the students who have taken part in the project have been just awesome as we worked together to develop educational programs to prevent sexual assaults, harassment, abuse and bullying.

I'm especially proud of the Stand Up and Speak Out program, because I know from personal experience that it is only when we learn to talk openly and honestly about these issues that we can begin to change the culture.

There are times when more men than women are taking part in the project, which is truly encouraging. And I was touched when one young woman who took part in our discussions reached out to me afterward and told me that I was a Mama Bear. I'd never thought of myself that way, but now I wear the title proudly.

Since that day in 1982 when I was attacked, new laws and improved policies have altered the ways victims of sexual assaults are treated, as well as how their assailants are handled by the criminal justice system. But not nearly enough has changed at the college level where all too often administrators are reluctant to hand down punishments that match the crime. Sometimes there's no punishment at all, perhaps because officials are more concerned about protecting the school's reputation than they are in seeing justice done.

That is why it is so important that the project we're building at U.N.H. is one that can be taken to any campus in the nation, or the world for that matter, because the founding principles of education, compassion and inspiring the courage to speak out are universal in their application. And, as we now know, they are very effective.

There is clearly a long way to go. But if we can reach only a small percentage of young people, it will be the start of a movement.

Janet Jensen is the founder of The Jensen Project (www.thejensenproject.com), which is committed to curbing harassment, hazing, bullying and sexual abuse among young people.