MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota campus resource center sees ripple effects of Cornell sexual assault case 01M4XT42V8MNRPMCYZ24Q44X64

NINA MOINI: When a story about sexual assault on a college campus makes national headlines, it can spark difficult questions. How common is this? Are universities doing enough to prevent it? And what happens to survivors after the headlines fade? At Cornell University, a former student filed a lawsuit alleging that seven fraternity members drugged and sexually assaulted her at a party in 2024.

The case has drawn renewed scrutiny after no criminal charges were initially filed. Here in Minnesota, The Aurora Center at the University of Minnesota and Augsburg University works with survivors of sexual violence and prevention efforts. We're joined by the center's director, Katie Eichele to talk about what this national conversation means for students here. Thanks for joining us, Katie.

KATIE EICHELE: Thank you, Nina, for this really important conversation.

NINA MOINI: When a story like this one at Cornell does get so much national attention, do you feel that it changes the conversations you're having with students here in the Twin Cities in any way? Are you just having more of them? How is this impacting your work?

KATIE EICHELE: Well, we definitely have seen an increase in survivors reaching out. And not just survivors, but also community members who care about the issue, who want to learn what can be done. But going back to survivors-- stories like this give them permission to actually explore their experiences and figure out what can be done, and more importantly, how can I remain safe.

NINA MOINI: Sexual assault on college campuses is something people have been talking about for decades. What do you think people are still missing about how common of an occurrence it is, or about the circumstances under which something like this can happen?

KATIE EICHELE: I think when conversations like this rise up, there is something that continues to happen where we want people to remain silent and they question-- well, why did they wait so long, or why now? Even if there is a survivor who comes forward immediately, something that I think is important to realize is that trauma doesn't have a timeline. And that whether something happened yesterday, a year ago, or decades ago, trauma oftentimes prevents survivors from immediately labeling and processing an assault.

NINA MOINI: And that's important to have education around that for everybody, of how trauma can manifest and how experiences can change, especially directly after an event. But to your point, at any time. Where do those conversations need to be happening?

KATIE EICHELE: A lot of times we see our clients reaching out to friends and loved ones. And sometimes survivors even ask me, like, "How do I talk about this vulnerable experience in my life to a friend or loved one?" And so we outline what do you want to happen in that conversation. Because oftentimes, when we're talking about vulnerability and difficulty, we as listeners, we don't get a roadmap.

And so survivors and I will talk about, "Well, what would be helpful? What do you need?" "I need someone to listen without judgment. I need someone to hear me out and love me. I just need support and to have some space." And then we also talk about, "What don't you need?" "I don't need judgment. I don't need to be blamed. I don't need for someone to fix it and solve it. Because I need to figure out, what's best for me."

NINA MOINI: So many questions. And I do wonder, with the different ripple effects of something like this, there are so many different entities that sometimes end up being involved, whether it be law enforcement or universities or a sorority or a fraternity, or any type of an organization. A lot of different people are sometimes involved in the system of how things happen.

So when a sexual assault happens or when a report is made on the University of Minnesota or Augsburg campuses where you're doing your work, can you describe roughly what happens next? I know everybody has an individual experience. Not everybody cares to go to law enforcement. But can you talk about what the process could look like?

KATIE EICHELE: Absolutely. So when I'm explaining this to my clients, I oftentimes talk about reporting in three different ways-- that they can report to the university that moves through a Title IX federal law. They can also report to law enforcement-- and that's a different process altogether. That's a criminal process. And then later on, they might be interested in pursuing some type of civil negligence or damage process. And that's completely separate.

But when they report to the university, we've done some behind-the-scenes work working with our Title IX office to provide compassionate outreach. It's viewpoint-neutral so that we're not taking that office isn't taking sides. But they are meeting survivors with compassion, with care, with taking down the facts and the report, and also explaining options-- whether that's to pursue a formal investigation that could result in an actual outcome of something like suspension or expulsion, or something educational.

Or there's also informal outcomes. Sometimes our survivors aren't ready to actually pursue that process of a formal report, because it can be long and arduous, and they have to maybe attend a panel. And so there are other restorative measures that we've been exploring as an institution to try to help survivors heal from that harm.

NINA MOINI: I wonder too, when it comes to consent and the idea of consent and education around it, what's important for students or anyone to learn these days? And what do you think people are still missing or not educating people around enough about teaching consent?

KATIE EICHELE: I love this question because it depends on who you are asking this question to. I think older generations are viewing consent in the way that they may have been taught many, many, many years ago. And I still hear bubbles of those conversations of silence could still imply consent. And that's just not how policy exists today, nor a lot of laws.

And so I love speaking with our students now who have been raised around a different approach to consent. It does involve asking and then involves listening to see what the response is. And if you don't actually get a response, you don't have consent. But then there's the third one of respecting what the answer that the person has provided. Whether it was an answer that disappointed us, we don't continue to put pressure on that person to get the outcome that we desire.

NINA MOINI: You mentioned education like this, which is a part of prevention-- making sure that people have more knowledge. Can you talk a little bit more about what some other approaches to effective prevention look like to you as it relates to college campuses?

KATIE EICHELE: Absolutely. So a lot of college campuses, of course, are still incorporating consent education. At the Aurora Center, we're incorporating what do healthy relationships look like? Not just intimate relationships, but healthy friendships, healthy family relationships. We talk about setting boundaries with each other, and that boundaries aren't just telling other people what we need, but to say, "If you continue to cross this boundary, here is what I'm going to do." Because we can't control other people's behaviors, but we can control how we respond.

We also promote things like bystander intervention. When we see something that doesn't feel right or is unsafe, can we give a collective agency to groups of people to say, "Hey, we're looking out for the safety of these individuals and want to intervene."

But I think there's another element that we need to dig deeper into, and that's something that Aurora is continuing to explore right now. That as a society, we've really become comfortable dehumanizing one another. We sometimes see each other as objects or as transactions. Like, what can this other person give to us? Rather than seeing other people as human beings, beings deserving of dignity. And at Aurora, we really want to challenge that way of thinking and being. Otherwise, we think that we'll continue to see violence, and we'll also continue to see people dismiss that violence.

NINA MOINI: How do you think people misunderstand what survivors may experience in the weeks, months, or even years after something happens to them? The timeline is something that has been talked about and questioned in this Cornell case. Changing perceptions or stories or written accounts of what happened. What do you think people need to understand about how survivors may experience trauma?

KATIE EICHELE: This is a really fascinating question because trauma, it manifests from person to person differently. And so I think that's a major misconception that there's a perfect survivor. And they go through certain understandings of what their experience was. And the reality is there can be a lot of disbelief. There's a lot of shock that actually happens initially. And some people go numb. And instead of having to think about something, they push it away and put it in a box, and they continue on with their daily life until something actually might trigger that event-- like a major national conversation.

And when the public thinks that, "Oh, they should have reported right away and they should have done it this way and this way and this way," the challenge is that we create these types of systems that often are devoid of emotions, and what the actual brain might do in terms of dealing with stress. And so I want the public to understand that not every survivor is going to behave in the same exact way that we think they should.

NINA MOINI: When an assault happens, what is a healthy way for a university or an educational entity to respond to a survivor? What does it look like to support someone, or oppositely, what could make the process harder?

KATIE EICHELE: This is a wonderful question in terms of what institutions can do, I think being able to provide a confidential resource where survivors can map out-- did this even happen to me? And is it a policy violation? That's usually the first stage that I have to go through with my clients-- is they talk about what happened and then we investigate-- well, was that a policy violation? And if so, what are the options available? And then what feels safe for a victim survivor?

And then if a survivor decides to actually report, to have someone who has been well-trained in understanding, again, due process rights. But how to ask trauma-informed questions or what we would call forensic experiential trauma interviewing questions, how to ask questions that don't necessarily put blame on either the responding party or the reporting party, but that ask questions that are meaningful.

"Tell me a little bit more about this situation, or tell me what you were thinking when you made this decision or chose to engage in this action." That's actually really helpful so that individuals going through those processes don't feel like they're being judged or that they just feel comfortable sharing the experience and the facts that they understand.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Katie, for students who want to help create a safer campus community for themselves, their friends, for everybody, what are some practical things everybody can do to perhaps educate themselves and help support that environment?

KATIE EICHELE: This is actually a question that I get often, and I actually had a high school student who was writing a paper reach out with this very question. And I told him, you can certainly look at the policies that your institution has. You can make sure that victim services are available to victim-survivors, and you could do education and learn more about consent, healthy relationships, and bystander intervention. And I could literally imagine his eyes rolling back to the back of his head.

And so I took a pause and I reframed. And I asked, "Knowledge alone doesn't create change. And so my question to you is, what needs changing in your spheres, and what are you capable of doing? And then not only that, but what sphere of influence do you feel you have, and what do you want to do with it?"

NINA MOINI: Important questions and an important conversation, Katie. Thanks so much for your time. We really appreciate it.

KATIE EICHELE: Absolutely. Thank you for inviting me.

NINA MOINI: That was Katie Eichele, Director of the Aurora Center at the University of Minnesota and Augsburg University. The Aurora Center has a 24-hour helpline. You can call 612-626-9111.