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Rape Counselors See Their Work Altered by Issues in Bryant Case

By Kirk Johnson

[DENVER] Aug. 17 – A few months ago, a young woman walked into the office of the Rape Assistance and Awareness Program, like so many women before her, to describe how she had been assaulted and to ask for help.

But she ended up talking about Kobe Bryant. Not the law or the criminal sexual assault case against Mr. Bryant, the Los Angeles Lakers basketball star, said Marisol Solarte-Erlacher, a counselor, but rather the harder, more nebulous questions of belief and perception.

The young woman said her friends did not believe the account from Mr. Bryant's accuser. The implications of that terrified her when she realized her friends might not believe her. The fear became paralyzing.

"She never did report to the police," Ms. Solarte-Erlacher said.

The Bryant case, in which jury selection is scheduled to begin Friday, has become part of an extended and tangled conversation about sexual assault, the boundaries of privacy and the power of celebrity. But for groups like the Rape Assistance and Awareness Program, the Denver area's oldest and largest private assault counseling agency, conversation has become context.

The issues raised by the case, staff members and rape survivors say, have altered how counseling and rape-awareness education is done and how victims think about their choices, their prospects of recovery and themselves.

Mr. Bryant, 25, has admitted having sex with his accuser on July 30, 2003, but told the police it was consensual. He pleaded not guilty. The woman, whose name has not been officially released, said that she went to his hotel room, near Vail, voluntarily and that they kissed, but that he became violent and raped her.

"This case has raised sexual violence as a topic," said Dr. Sheri Vanino, director of victim services for RAAP (pronounced rap). "It's become an everyday discussion around the water cooler in a way that it hasn't been before."

But some repercussions for RAAP are in fact quite positive. Counselors, administrators and rape survivors say elevated awareness could help, for example, in getting financial or political support for their work.

The number of people seeking help at the agency has jumped sharply this year - up about 50 percent in the first six months of 2004, compared with the average of the last three years - even though the Denver police say the number of assaults has remained flat. Part of the explanation counselors have given is a process they call triggering, when wounds and memories from an assault that might have occurred years earlier are re-exposed by new stimuli. And with news of the Bryant case, the stimuli can come nonstop.

“It really, really touched a nerve,” one rape victim who received counseling at the center this year said. When she watches television coverage of the Bryant case, she said, her rage sometimes boils over.

“I have actually found myself yelling at Katie Couric,” the woman said.

Having more people thinking about sexual assault also creates a new fight for groups like RAAP because, counselors say, the Bryant case has reinforced many myths they work to fight: that women claim rape for revenge or attention or money. But they also worry about being seen as too partisan in accepting the account of Mr. Bryant’s accuser.

The center’s education specialists, who talked to about 13,000 schoolchildren last year, say the Bryant case is so pervasive in Colorado that questions about it are part of the drill.

Clare Johnston, a community educator at the agency, says she tells students she does not know what happened in the Bryant case. Ms. Johnston added: “I then say, ‘But there are things I find upsetting.’ That’s the angle that I take. I really try to turn it around and talk about victim-blaming and why it’s so harmful.”

Often, the education specialists say, questions about the case come in the form of declarations about Mr. Bryant’s innocence, and sports allegiances, especially among high school boys, are usually involved.

Ryan Lusk, another community educator, said his strategy was to say that he was a Boston Celtics fan, and ask if anyone thought Celtics fans were more likely than Lakers fans to think Mr. Bryant was guilty.

“I’ll say it’s kind of messed up that you’re letting your sports team affect your thinking on this,” Mr. Lusk said. “Usually they sit back and think about it.”

Among survivors, the nuances of the case have played out in sometimes surprising ways.

Melissa Bishop, a special education teacher who was raped in college 15 years ago, regularly talks about the Bryant case with a woman she met at RAAP. It is filtered, Ms.

Bishop said, through the intensely private process of recovery and memory. It is not a conversation outsiders would understand, she said.

She said the case had reinforced what kept her from telling the police what happened to her: the thoughts of having to prove one's own victimization and overcome doubt. "This case plays out the very reason why I didn't report," she said.

Ms. Bishop's friend in those conversations, Aimee Stoffel, who did go to the police and saw her attacker sent to prison, said she had to stop following coverage about the case.

"I know what happens when you go through something like this – how hard it is," she said. "It just hits too close to home."

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