

DENVER POST

Where Does the Blame for Rapes Lie?

By Diane Carman, *Denver Post* Columnist

Wednesday, February 11, 2004

The whole scenario is extremely disturbing. When police described the scene of the alleged rapes to University of Colorado president Elizabeth Hoffman back in 2001, she reportedly called it “unbelievable.”

While many details are in dispute, everyone seems to agree that three women were very drunk in their apartment and ended up having random sex with several football players and recruits.

Some say the women were involved in sex acts with more than one guy at a time. There is testimony that the women may not have been fully conscious. There are statements that others stood around watching.

And now, more than two years later, the CU administrators, lawyers and many of us in the community are engaged in a roiling debate about who should be held responsible.

Was this a case of premeditated gang rape?

Were these women football groupies, eager to participate in an orgy and clearly consenting to sex?

Or were the women behaving so irresponsibly that they put themselves at risk for sexual assault and must accept the consequences?

How the casual observer answers those questions speaks volumes.

In fact, there’s actually a psychological test to measure your attitude. It’s called the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, and a lot of folks in Colorado seem to be scoring off the charts on it.

Robin Sawyer, chairman of the Department of Public and Community Health at the University of Maryland, has used the BMAS in his research on athletes and sexual assault.

He defines the scale this way: “Generally, individuals subscribing to rape myth tend to believe that aggressors are not responsible for their actions and/or the victims are to blame for their predicament.”

He has conducted seminars with college athletes on campuses across the country (not including CU). His mission: to keep them from getting into trouble.

“The way I try to educate them,” he said, “is to tell them: ‘Don’t get into that situation in the first place.’”

He means the men.

“When two human beings are having sex and they’re in love and it’s wonderful, obviously verbal consent is superfluous,” Sawyer said. “But when one, usually the woman, is saying slow down, that she’s not sure, the men better damn well stop and ask unless they want a police officer knocking on their door the next day.”

Ninety percent of the time, he said, alcohol is involved in acquaintance rape. “She gets drunk and seems to like him. Sex happens, and then the whole interpretation of it goes awry.”

But the bottom line is this: Without explicit consent, it’s rape. End of discussion. “And I think the kids need to know that,” he said.

Marti Hopper, a psychologist and adult prevention education coordinator for the Boulder group Moving to End Sexual Assault, said more than just the students need to know that. Blaming the victim is rampant in our culture.

“We don’t do this around drunk driving,” she said. “We don’t say, ‘He was drunk. He didn’t know what he was doing.’” We don’t suggest the victims should have stayed home if they wanted to be safe.

“When it comes to rape, all of a sudden all the focus is on the victim: What she was doing. What she was drinking. What she was wearing.”

Tonna Pallas, a therapist for the Rape Assistance and Awareness program, made the same point. “When there’s a mugging, people don’t say, ‘Well, you were walking down the street wearing expensive clothing. What did you expect?’”

Hopper conducts rape awareness seminars on the CU campus and said she’ll often ask the groups, “What did you do in the last week to avoid rape?” Invariably, she said, only the women raise their hands. “They assume it’s their responsibility.”

She also said she has found, despite the myths surrounding acquaintance rape, “most of the time the perpetrator knows what he’s doing.” He doesn’t seek consent, she said. He doesn’t believe he needs it.

She offered a recent case as an example.

A group was at a party near CU, she said, and one woman had too much to drink. Her friend decided to take her home and a guy offered to help. After they returned the woman to her apartment where she fell asleep, the two left. Later, the guy returned to the apartment alone and raped her.

“Just because someone is drunk doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want with her body,” Hopper said.

Robert Maust, chairman of the standing committee on substance abuse at CU, said he isn’t passing judgment on the recruiting scandal. But it has brought the problem of alcohol and sexual misconduct on campus into sharp relief. CU is hardly alone in confronting it, he said, and there are no easy answers.

The challenge is to get through to young people, he said. “How do you get them to reflect more on what they want out of life? How do you get them to stop just living for the moment?”

Indeed.

Copyright 2004 *Denver Post*.