

Spann: We all have a responsibility to stop sexual abuse

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In the last few weeks, we have seen a number of stories about sexual assaults that beg the question: Where are the allies, and why are we not holding ourselves accountable and acting as intervening bystanders?

At SafePlace, we understand that we all have a part in ending sexual violence — and only when we take on this responsibility will we create a community free of these crimes.

An important part of accomplishing the vision of SafePlace, to end sexual and domestic violence, hinges on our ability to empower each and every one of us to play a part in ending these crimes.

This includes holding ourselves as individuals accountable for our own actions and acting as allies to those who are victimized, at risk of being victimized or are in danger of being a perpetrator.

In the July 25 article "Case dropped; blot remains," we learned of a young man who was accused of sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl at a party.

The charge against the young man, 20, was dismissed because "there were too many discrepancies in the case." Among those discrepancies were eyewitness accounts that the victim, a 16-year-old girl, was drunk and propositioned the young man accused of raping her. In fact, not only did others at the party state she was drunk, but the accused also recognized she was drunk.

No one witnessing the situation intervened to protect either the young girl or man in this scenario. No one, including the accused, recognized that someone under the influence of alcohol cannot consent. On that night, at that party, it was acceptable that she reduced her personal value to an opportunity for sex and that he reduced his personal value to someone who cannot refuse sex (his words: "I don't care who you are — any guy ... is not going to walk out").

These two young people will live with the consequences of being part of a sexual assault case — one as the accuser and one as an accused. They both deserved better.

Perhaps because we allow such a strong myth about the need for individuality and privacy to take the place of what we know is right, we neglect our responsibility — to both the young girl and young man. We abandon our friends and loved ones in the name of this myth. Maybe because bystanders also have been drinking, they are passive.

Yet as a community, we must encourage a change in the attitudes and behaviors that leave us passive bystanders or diminish our personal value and responsibility to be a part of the solution.

We may be afraid to intervene. Yet wouldn't each of us have wanted someone who cared about us, even

a stranger, to put a hand on our elbow with raised eyebrows and say, "Hang on, let's do something else"? Can't we each remember a close call, when someone else stood between us and trouble?

Let's learn how to take on the responsibility for intervening when we can. Let's refuse to blame victims. Let's be accountable for our decisions and actions. Let's make our community free of sexual abuse and rape.

Spann is executive director of SafePlace.

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