

Non-Stranger Rape: Dr. Lisak and the “Not in Our State” Sexual Assault Summit by Betsy Danforth

“There's a common assumption about men who commit sexual assault on a college campus: that they made a one-time, bad decision. But psychologist David Lisak says this assumption is wrong —and dangerously so.” (Joseph Shapiro, NPR, March 4, 2010)

The VOICE Center’s “Not in Our State: Statewide Summit on Sexual Assault” was an educational conference that brought together university students, staff and faculty leaders, anti-violence professionals, law enforcement officers, counselors and, most notably, forensic consultant Dr. David Lisak. The purpose of this conference was to examine the problem of non-stranger sexual assault and its consequences, and to formulate a plan for working toward ending this problem and finding solutions for our university.

The summit began with a lecture by Dr. Lisak who outlined the profile of the average non-stranger sexual assault perpetrator. The most important message is that the majority of these perpetrators are repeat offenders, are predatory, and are, in fact, what he calls “undetected rapists.” A typical undetected rapist, Lisak found, does not use a weapon, is not mentally ill, plans and premeditates his attacks, uses multiple strategies to make his victims vulnerable, and uses alcohol deliberately. Another important take home message is that almost half of the victims of non-stranger, unwanted sexual contact reported

institutional betrayal, which is reportedly linked to increased anxiety and disassociation.

Lisak emphasized that some of the most popular and widely-believed myths about non-stranger rapes are that these events are accidents of circumstance, that the perpetrator will never do it again, or that it was simply a matter of miscommunication and mutual intoxication. However, Lisak, drawing on decades of research, interviews and investigation, painted a picture of offenders who are more often than not predatory, serial offenders, narcissistic, and manipulative. His Boston area study in 2002, for instance, found that of the 1,882 men assessed, 120 were identified as rapists, 76 of those were serial rapists, and 44 were single-act rapists. (Lisak and Miller, 2002). In replicated studies since 2002, the average % of men who rape are only between 4-6 % of the male population, but, these perpetrators are responsible for close to 90% of all rapes.

These serial non-stranger rapists often actively set the stage for an assault and exploit vulnerabilities in potential victims—inviting younger students to parties, serving strong alcoholic beverages, and more recently, using rohypnol or other blackout drugs to incapacitate a potential victim

We often hear the argument that a victim’s story just doesn’t add up. She or he just didn’t make sense, and why the heck didn’t they just fight

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back? Lisak discussed the phenomenon of “tonic immobility,” or as we more commonly refer to it, “playing dead.” He noted that “fight or flight” is a great human conceit, and that a more common response to a threat is to freeze, or run, or, if all else fails, fight. So why exactly do we expect sexual assault victims to fight their attackers who are generally bigger, stronger and meaner than themselves? Lisak also pointed out that “when we interview someone who is traumatized, we will get inconsistencies.” He made the point that when a human is in trauma, we depend on our *implicit memory* that is unconscious and reactive instead of our *explicit memory* that is conscious, willful, sequential and contextual. In addition, too many times, victims of sexual assault are literally interrogated when they report a crime, and these interrogation techniques serve to re-traumatize a victim through intimidation which further confuses the victim. It has been shown time and time again that rape victims are approached with great skepticism in most societies and unfortunately, ours is no exception.

So, what does this mean to a college or university campus? First, more thorough background checks on perspective students are important. If we can get a clearer picture of our students’ backgrounds, it will help to greatly lower the risk of having criminals on our campus. Secondly, our investigations into sexual assault reports need to be as thorough and sound as possible. The importance of effectively investigating not only the particular crime, but also the perpetrator’s past more thoroughly is essential. Much in the way law enforcement would investigate a drug deal-- they not only investigate that particular crime, but the dealer’s overall behavior. Lisak

pointed out that many times someone who knows the perpetrator will divulge information about their behavior which is consistent with an undetected rapist’s behavior. Likewise, someone familiar with a victim may recognize behaviors consistent with PTSD or other trauma syndromes.

We are lucky to have MSU’s well-trained police officers with MSU Chief of Police Robert Putzke at the helm of our campus investigations. Chief Putzke is experienced and savvy at leading these investigations and he and many members of his staff were in attendance at the summit. MSU also has a new Office of Institutional Equity with a Title IX officer available to investigate these crimes.

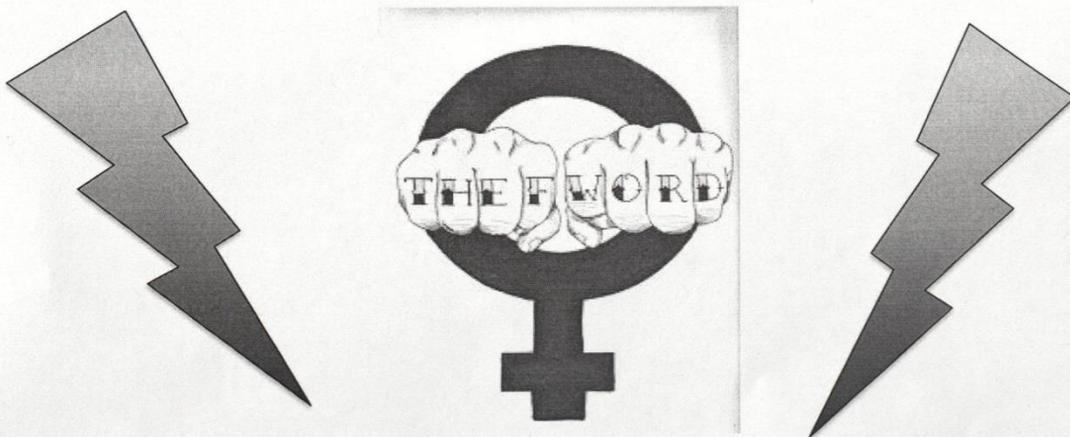
But the rest of the campus needs to educate ourselves about these issues. Keeping in mind that a victim may not be ready to report a rape to the police, and may not be aware of the excellent services offered by the MSU VOICE Center, they may initially tell a friend, an RA, a health care provider, a staff member, or a professor about the assault. We are responsible for educating ourselves about sexual assault so that our responses are appropriate and helpful. We need to actively hold perpetrators responsible, **not** victims. We need to, as the VOICE Center’s campaign states, LISTEN, BELIEVE, AND SUPPORT those in need of our help after a sexual assault. The VOICE Center offers various trainings for our staff and students—call them at 994-7662 to find out about these programs. If you need to reach the 24-hour crisis line, call 994-7069. Campus police can be reached at 994-2121 and we also have a wonderful resource in the community at the Help Center—they can be reached at 586-3333.

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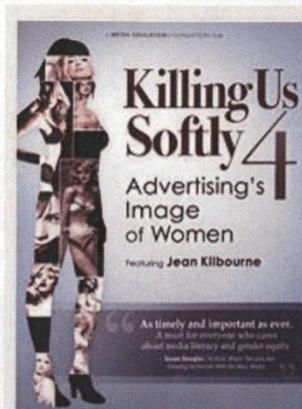
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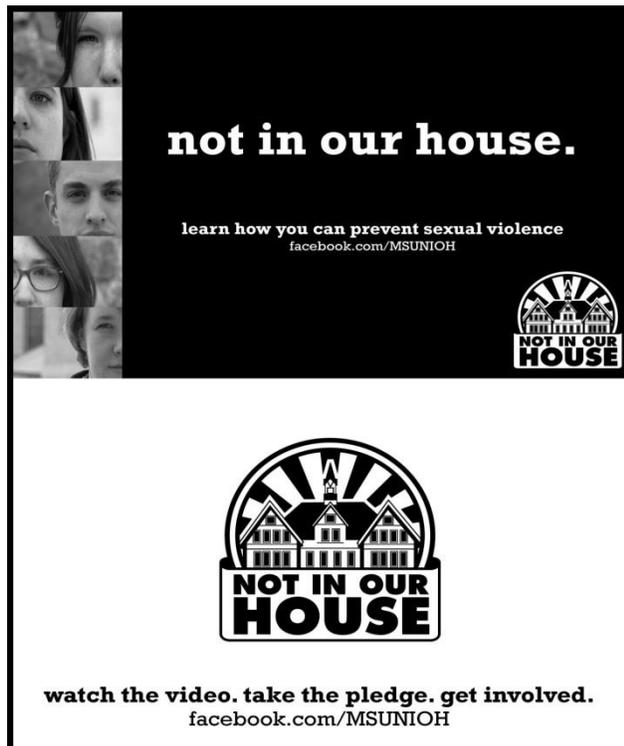
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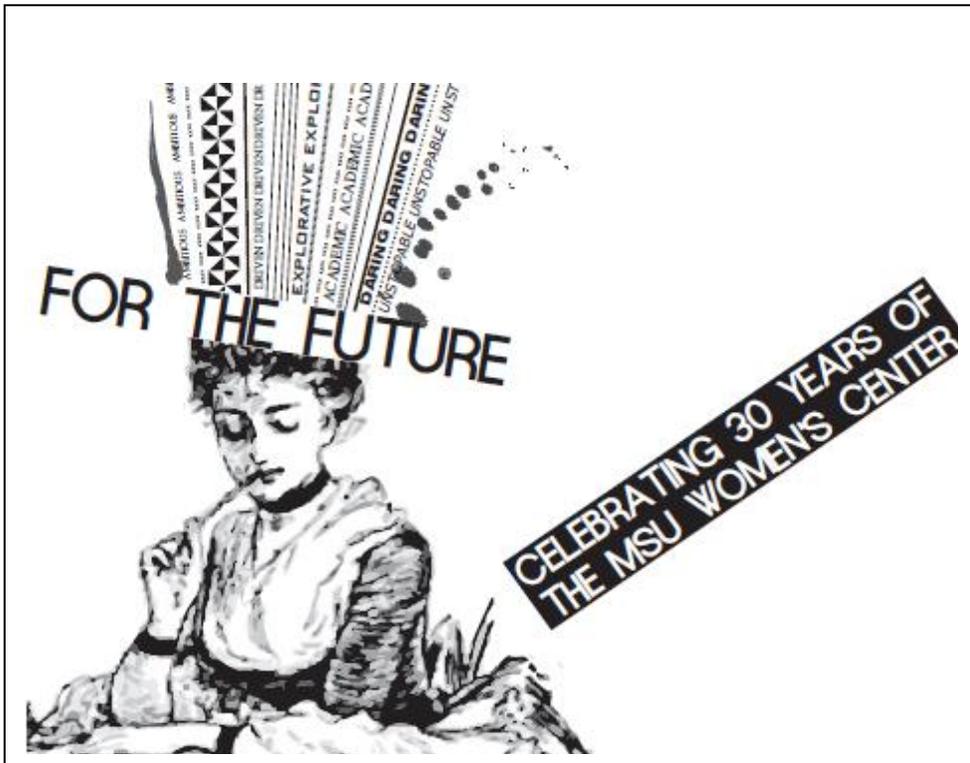
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