



Photo by Kevin Donovan

First year Mai Nguyen hangs photographs in her art piece during Take Back The Night on Sunday, Apr. 22. The event was organized by the class of Women and Gender Studies 201: Women and Change in the U.S.

Dismantling Rape Culture

By Marlen Gomez
Watchtower Team

Over the past few months, attention has been given to addressing sexual assault at Augustana. However, members of the campus community are aware that dismantling the culture of sexual assault is no easy task for one person.

“One of the problems that we face on college campuses is by the time that students get here, they’ve already been exposed to so many cultural forces that send them problematic messages,” professor of history and women and gender studies Jane Simonsen said.

These messages are seen from the environments created around us all, seen through the media, the entertainment industry, education on gender and sexuality and the presence of violence. President Steve Bahls also addressed the matter of what contributes to this culture.

“It’s both a ‘who’ and a ‘what.’ Willful ignorance on the topic contributes, along with people not feeling empowered or not sure how to intervene, silencing survivors, and accepting a popular culture that glamorizes irresponsible behavior,” Bahls said in an email.

Simonsen said she finds it hard to separate rape culture from any of the components of a society that is competitive with others. Positive moves made by marginalized groups such as women, the LGBT+ community and by people of color create a backlash and fear on the part of white people, as

Simonsen said, and sees this feeding into conversations on sexual misconduct.

The small everyday interactions made with those around us have the risk of creating a snowball effect as well. Senior Natalie Trujillo, founder and president of +IMPACT, tries to make sense of the environment around her.

“[This environment] is just the way people treat people,” Trujillo said. “A lot of the music we listen to is sexist or degrading towards women, people might make rape jokes or sexist jokes, and if you’re willing to do that and you’re not going to step in and stop those actions, then what’s going to stop you from stopping bigger situations?”

The presence of organizations and groups at Augustana that tackle the issues and responses to sexual misconduct continue to make efforts to inform the community. However, even these groups fall short on reaching everybody.

“Sometimes it feels like events, like even Take Back the Night, are a little bit preaching to the choir, which doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have them, but I think it’s a problem that people stick with their groups a lot of times and don’t hear what other people have to say,” Simonsen said.

Senior Nila Kannankeril, one of the founders of iSTEM, sees policy changes made by student-led groups on campus— as different issues are addressed — as vital in creating change with long-lasting effects. Some Greek life groups have already started to make

changes to their constitutions in response to the events that happened earlier in the year.

Simonsen agrees that faculty play a significant role in creating changes within their curriculum or adding these discussions within their classrooms, but some often have a difficult time bringing up these issues. She sees the opportunity to have these discussions within the first-year experience as a valuable way to integrate the conversations in classes.

“This is the thing about entering the adult world: you have to set up some sort of system of responsibility and accountability so students are holding the college accountable and students are holding each other accountable. It is really difficult,” senior Jaime McLean said. McLean is a member of the Task Force on Sexual Assault Response and Prevention.

Bahls agrees in the necessity of holding everyone accountable for their actions and responses. He even admits to not being an expert, which is why he appointed a task force to rely on members who do have expertise.

“I’ve been talking with my peers about what we’re doing here at Augustana and how we can partner across several colleges to continue tackling this cultural issue from as many angles as possible. I also think making it clear to leaders across campus that I support their efforts and will stand behind their work to facilitate positive change is important in setting the tone and expectations I have for our campus community,” Bahls said.

Gros looks toward the future

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with Gros and accompanied her to the first few chapter meetings in January. She was also one of the people who asked Gros for the case report.

However, Ansusinha said her motivation behind asking for the report had nothing to do with disbelief for Gros’ story. According to Ansusinha, there were rumors that some students wanted to press slander charges against Gros because she implicated the fraternity Phi Omega Phi (Poobah) in the case without presenting evidence and Ansusinha wanted to help defend Gros.

“We believed her. We heard about some people doubting her story who wanted to take action through a potential lawsuit, and I hoped that if she showed me the report, I could help,” Ansusinha said. “I just wanted to see the report to shut people up.”

Since Gros’ story became public, the Poobah house has been associated with sexual assault. During winter term, members were spit on, cars were egged, and “Poobah = rape” was spray painted on the Sorenson bridge.

According to Tomlin, who is a former Poobah, these sometimes violent demonstrations of campus unrest frustrated members of the fraternity.

“As time progressed, Poobah started to feel more and more like they were being unfairly targeted, like they were receiving a disproportionate amount of attention on campus and that perhaps other issues from other groups were being ignored,” Tomlin said.

However, Gros said that those showing anger through public displays missed the larger point of what she was trying to do.

“People egging houses or spray painting bridges, people not wanting to have parties with Poobah is all getting blamed on me because I’m the ‘face.’ That’s never what it was,” Gros said. “I never was trying to ruin anyone’s year. That was not my plan. A lot of hurtful things have been said, and that makes it really hard because I want to be doing whatever I can for the survivors.”

Before she deactivated, Gros said she heard about a formal apology from the Delta Chi Theta executive board to Poobah concerning “the whole mess they think I caused.”

Tomlin also deactivated from Poobah after four years of significant contribution to the fraternity

because “it felt like more and more members were being progressively emboldened to publicly and frequently doubt a survivor’s story.”

According to Delta Chi Theta president, Madeline Himpelmann, the sorority did not make any formal apology to Phi Omega Phi.

Erin Ansusinha said although there was no apology to Poobah, there was communication to the group that Gros would not give up the report. However, she said nothing was meant to blame Gros or to apologize for her actions.

“Any conversation I had with the Poobahs was because the entire group was taking heat. An apology from me doesn’t mean her story’s not true. It shouldn’t have been interpreted as Margaret doing wrong,” Ansusinha said.

She felt empathy for the Poobahs, who had been receiving antagonism since January. “How do you appropriately react to your entire group being lumped in with the same label — ‘Rape House?’”

According to Ansusinha, Gros’ deactivation was a result of miscommunication. She wishes they could have understood each other better.

“I had no idea this supposed apology had anything to do with her deactivation,” Ansusinha said. “I thought it might be a number of other things not related to Phi Omega Phi, and I wish she would’ve asked somebody for clarification.”

Phi Omega Phi declined multiple requests for comment from The WatchTower.

Now, Gros looks to the future and graduation in a few weeks. She plans to attend Loyola nursing school in Peoria like her mother did. She wants to study to become a hospice nurse because of the nurse who took care of her mother in her last days.

She wants to continue advocating for survivors of sexual assault who are struggling and need support.

She wants to move on from the hold that this case has had on her life.

She wants to be free.

“One day, I’ll be able to look at those pictures. It’s going to suck and I’m probably going to cry, but I’m going to read those reports and what they said. I’m going to look at those pictures again and I’m going to be OK,” Gros said.

“I’m going to realize that it’s a part of my life, but it does not control me or own me like it does right now. But that day hasn’t come yet, and it’s probably not going to be for a while.”