

3/9/2016

Dear Representative Crownover,

I am writing in response to comments you made concerning sexual assault, as quoted in the Dallas Morning News, March 8, 2016, namely, "*I would be curious to see how many times a pure, sober sexual assault happened. The best chance is being sober.*" To be clear, my intent is not to shame or berate you (wholly ineffective tactics in creating change). I hope that you'll receive this message as an invitation to dialogue about this incredibly important topic. As a sexual assault advocate and professional counselor who has worked primarily with survivors of this crime, I do find your commentary problematic, but not unique.

Perhaps I should begin with where we agree. And yes, there is *some* common ground.

Drug facilitated (including alcohol) sexual assault is absolutely a problem in our culture, and especially on college campuses where drinking is a normalized activity. Sexual predators, whether they regard themselves as such or not, often use the presence of alcohol to their advantage to gain access to victims through proximity, circumstance or apparent need, "Oh you lost your friends? Let me make sure you get home safely." The problem is not so much the drinking itself but the mindset of those around us who seek to take advantage of a widely accepted social practice - especially in college.

Here is where we differ: I have completed thousands of hours of crisis intervention and trauma work with survivors of sexual violence in a college town with a very large, prominent University. While some of my clients experienced their abuse while intoxicated, there are many others who did not. They were sober. And that sobriety did not prevent the abuse. Sobriety didn't change the fact that someone dismissed their right to have or express an opinion about what was going to happen to their body.

If a person goes out and gets blind drunk, and maybe even loses several articles of clothing (might as well tackle two myths at once), and there isn't someone with a predatory mindset to take advantage of their vulnerable state - that person will wake up the next morning many possible things: egregiously hungover, slightly chilly, confused about certain details of the evening, ticked off that they scuffed their favorite pair of going out shoes, etc... But the one thing they will NOT wake up as -- is raped. It is the presence of a perpetrator that creates the scenario for which rape can occur.

Alcohol may increase vulnerability, but it doesn't make that person any more or less culpable for what happened to them. The same can be said for a variety of criminal acts that prey on the vulnerability of others; the heinous destructive crimes of opportunity.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I cannot begin to conceive of a scenario involving sexual assault where the word “pure” is an appropriate word choice. What does “pure” mean in the context of a traumatic and criminal act?

Does it involve a stranger - lurking in the bushes or a dark alley perhaps? Is it only about women? And finally, should we also dismiss validity of spousal/intimate partner rape? Which by the way, account for 30% of all adult cases of rape, according to some studies.

So in closing, I would invite you to consider the impact of your words, as well as the timing. You are a woman who has clearly achieved much in her career, and ascended to a leadership position that probably makes you a role model for some young women in Texas colleges and universities today. If I might be so generous, I am choosing to believe that your intention was not to blame women. I’m choosing to believe you intended to motivate women to realize we live in a dangerous world and that no one is better able to protect them, or advocate for their interests better than themselves.

Respectfully,

E.J. Smith, MS, LPC, NCC