

COPING IN SILENCE THEY ARE FRIENDS, CLASSMATES, AND VICTIMS

How Three CU Women Negotiated the System in the Aftermath of Sexual Assault

By Benjamin Ryan



Phoebe woke up at 6 a.m. and left his room without saying good-bye. She ran back to her dorm room and called a friend from home.

"I was sort of in shock... I was crying in my room."

Kate passed out from drinking. When she regained consciousness, she found herself back in her own bed.

"I was just dead... I knew what was happening, but I was just paralyzed ... asking myself, had I given any invitation for this?"

Melissa never spoke to anyone about the incident, and only recently as a reaction to a friend's similar experience, began to see it in a different light.

"I thought it was my fault. He was a senior, and you think he'd have the sense."

While the Columbia Senate continues to deliberate potential changes and revisions to the Sexual Misconduct Policy, which is up for vote on Friday, another much less visible group of people deliberate their own parallel trials. Theirs are internal struggles, often shielded by emotional barriers of shame and fear, public scrutiny, and discomfort.

They are survivors of sexual assault.

Peeling away the layers of policy and politics, the core issue at hand with the upcoming vote remains a concern for the safety and well-being of members of the Columbia community who have been sexually assaulted, and for the invisible group who will one day suffer the same fate. These accounts often remain in the dark, and the issue at hand becomes distant, drowned in shaky statistics and dubious third-hand reports.

These three women came forward to tell their stories. Their names and those of others involved have been changed to protect their privacy.

PHOEBE

During the spring term of her first year at Barnard College, Phoebe met a senior named Mark in her psychology course. They hung out a few times and became friends. Nothing sexual took place, though she sensed that he was interested in her.

The week before graduation, the two went to dinner downtown and afterward to a couple of bars. He offered her cocktails, drinking at the same pace as she. At 5'5", 105 pounds, Phoebe was drunk after three or four drinks and said that she wanted to go back to school.

Phoebe wasn't thinking of sex—rather of the fact that she was having trouble walking. She asked him to take her back to her room, but instead Mark helped her to his room. She had been there before, so she felt comfortable. And when they started kissing, she still felt the same way.

He began to undress her; she began to protest.

"Even though I was drunk, I was definitely saying 'I don't want my pants down,'" Phoebe recalled.

Forcefully, but also playfully, he repeatedly pulled at her underwear; she repeatedly pulled it up again.

He degraded her first year status, made fun of her for being young and inexperienced.

"Oh come on little girl," Phoebe remembered him saying, "making me feel bad for everything."

She was naked. He began to penetrate her. At first she was too drunk to realize what was happening, but when she did she pushed him off and told him to stop.

Then she passed out. When she drifted back into semi-consciousness, she discovered that he was having sex with her.

KATE

Kate, a Barnard first-year, sensed that Jeremy, a sophomore, wanted something physical with her. Their second time together, which she "wouldn't call dating," Kate told him that she was still getting over her old boyfriend.

The next night he invited her to meet him at the West End. He arrived with some friends and "set up a tab" with the bartender.

"He got me lots and lots of drinks," she said—about nine to 12, including four or five shots and then cocktails. She felt comfortable with how much she was drinking and with the environment.

A group of them went to Pronto's for pizza. Shortly after arriving Kate passed out. She tried to start walking home, but couldn't, so Jeremy picked her up and carried her back to her dorm room.

When she woke up, she was naked, and he was on top of her.

"I don't think I was in any condition to undress myself ... Physically, I was immobile," she recalled.

She said "no" twice. He penetrated her anal without a condom.

"That's when I said 'this is wrong.'" But she was too drunk to stop him.

"I think I was trying to make myself not conscious in a lot of ways... I made myself to the point of passive, because I have never in a million years thought it would have happened to me."

When she woke up in the morning he was gone.

MELISSA

Melissa had what she described as a "more common experience" during her first year at Columbia College.

She had been out drinking in the local bars. Afterwards, she stopped in a pizza place where she met a senior who lived in her dorm. The two went back to his room. Her memory of the incident is clouded by alcohol, and she

cannot remember exactly what had happened.

The next day she realized that she had lost her virginity. "I could feel it, knew that I had been taken advantage of, because I'd never had sex before," she said.

At the time Melissa did not think of it as

similar experience and Melissa began to change her mind, to re-examine what had happened.

"I had to deal with it in order to help her," she said. "It took a while to accept or to say that I was raped."

1 in every 5 rape victims attempts suicide [U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee and the FBI]

rape.

ONE IN EIGHT

The St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Crime Victims' Treatment Center reports that between three and five Columbia students are seen in the emergency department for sexual assault each month. About 100 people call the Barnard/Columbia Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center each year, though that number reflects repeat callers, non-University students, cases not involving sexual assault, and cases of past sexual victimization.

According to the most recent statistics, one in eight college women will be raped before they graduate. Many believe that this figure holds true for Columbia as well.

"I don't think Columbia is any different than any other college community on the issue of sexual assault," said Maura Bairley, program coordinator at the Barnard-Columbia Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center.

One of the elements under debate in the Sexual Misconduct Policy revisions is the policy's apparent inability to provide reliable statistics that accurately reflect the severity of the problem.

Rape is, in fact, the most under-reported major crime, with only seven percent of cases taken to the police. Over half of college females never tell anyone, friends or authorities, about their experience.

Sarah Richardson, CC '02, head of Students Active For Ending Rape (SAFER) led more than 40 dorm floor talks about rape last semester.

"I had the opportunity to make eye contact with a lot of these students... I would say, 'This is an issue that will touch or that has touched every one of you or someone you know.' And there was nodding ... that was something that came across to people."

Kate feels the same. "I just had to tell my suitemates about [the assault], and they imme-

1 in 8 college women will be raped while in college. [Martin, 1992]

diately knew someone who knew someone," she said.

THE MORNING AFTER: TAKING ACTION OR KEEPING SILENT

In the beginning, Melissa did not feel she had been raped, so she saw no need to take the case to any authorities or to seek help.

"I'd see him on campus and joke, 'Oh, there's my rapist.'"

Some time later a friend went through a

Phoebe was devastated. The next day she met with her Resident Advisor, who read to her the options she had, should she decide to press charges under Columbia's Sexual Misconduct Policy. She could either chose a disciplinary panel to deliberate her case or go through Dean's Discipline. Phoebe opted for the latter, feeling it would be more confidential.

She went to St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, where she had a rape kit done. This involves recording detailed accounts of bruises, scrapes, or any other physical evidence of abuse. The fingernails are scraped and cotton swabs are done all over the body, including the mouth, vagina, and anus. The pubic hair and vagina are inspected for hairs. All the potential physical evidence is put in envelopes and kept in cold storage, only opened and analyzed

Rape remains the most under-reported of all major crimes: only 7% of all rapes are reported to police. [Koss, Woodruff, & Koss-a Criminology study 1990]

under a police investigation.

Phoebe did eventually meet with a woman in the District Attorney's office. They told her she had a case, but that it would be difficult to convince a jury, since St. Luke's had not seen any bruises—"hard evidence," as the woman put it. Phoebe was afraid the story would get in the papers, so she decided against legal proceedings.

She hoped the deans could bring her justice.

Phoebe met with her Barnard dean, who told her that she would have to meet with Mark's dean, since under the Dean's Discipline policies at that time—May of 1998—the dean of the accused would both hear and make the decision for rape cases. Phoebe wrote up a statement and took it to the

dean, just days before Mark's graduation. The dean agreed to put a hold on Mark's diploma until the matter was resolved, though he would be allowed to attend the ceremonies, and his parents would think he graduated.

Phoebe was asked to return to the dean's office several times to repeat her story.

"I knew he was doing it to see if there were any inconsistencies," she said.

She began to lose faith in the process she had chosen and in the dean's ability to handle the situation effectively and sensitively.

"He's really great about these issues... I'm kidding," she said sarcastically about the dean. "I definitely could tell he wasn't trained on the issues ... maybe now he knows more. I could tell the issue was completely foreign to him.."

Eventually Phoebe received Mark's written statement and was asked for her response.

She described Mark's stance as saying "Oh well, one thing led to another and it just happened."

Two months later Phoebe received a two-sentence letter in the mail from Mark's dean saying her "claim was not supported." There was no explanation.

Phoebe feels justice was not done.

"It was easy for them to dismiss it. I was a freshman—my parents weren't on their ass all the time ... threatening a lawsuit... I'm sure there was pressure to let this guy graduate, because Columbia doesn't want their numbers to look bad," she said.

She has since seen Mark in public,

who she feels is in denial that he did something wrong. "I thought we had something going. I can't believe you did this to me," she recounted him saying to her.

"It's sad because I'm sure that he's done this to other people," she said. "He doesn't realize what he's done. It's upsetting to

that Columbia didn't do something to stop somebody like that."

She has become disillusioned about the University's policies and administration.

"I guess I was kind of naive with the school and the deans that a fair procedure would occur with the deans," she said.

"It has changed my perspective a lot: about men in general and about Columbia. You feel like you're at this really great school, that you're protected by the Administration. But they're just out to save themselves."

Dean A said that to believe this about the deans is to see them "on a lower moral plane than other people." He stressed that the deans are sensitive people, looking out for the best interest of the students.

He believes that deans do have the ability to make non-biased judgments about their

own students, even if they have had on-going relationships with them in the past.

The Dean's Discipline policy was altered in the fall of 1999 so that the primary contact for all cases of sexual assault is Brian Paquette, assistant dean of Student Affairs, who is a certified social worker. The accuser files complaint with him, but the case is still deliberated and decided upon in association with the class deans of the accused.

Dean A stressed that the deans do in fact receive rape sensitivity training.

This entails a one to one-and-a-half-day session in which deans hear presentations from about 20 organizations, which address a host of related topics. The deans also have the opportunity to participate in simulated scenarios with students.

They are given a training manual, prepared by the Provost's office, which includes relevant articles and guidelines for handling different kinds of complaints, as well as a copy of the Dean's Discipline regulations.

The training usually happens twice a year, except for this academic year, which has had no training, as the Provost's office has anticipated a change in the Sexual Misconduct Policy.

It is required for the Sexual Misconduct Policy panelists and for Gatekeeper deans—the initial contacts for students filing complaint, but not the dean necessarily hearing the case. Other deans are invited.

Beth Wilson, Associate Provost, said "Most of the deans who have been here for at least two years have been through this program." She said she "could not say that all of the newer deans have been through [the training]."

Whether they were trained or not, Kate was also disappointed with her experience with the deans.

She chose Dean's Discipline over the panel method because, according what she knew, Jeremy had been accused of rape before, been investigated by the panel, and had the charges dropped. From what she had heard, Jeremy had brought in three outside attorneys.



"I chose Dean's Discipline because I wouldn't have to face him and there was no threat of lawyers getting involved," she said.

She met with Jeremy's two deans and went through the same procedure as Phoebe, including the process of checking for inconsistencies, though she understood their need to do so.

"Yes, of course it's important that they check any story because, especially with date rape, there's such a fine line."

She concurs with Phoebe about the deans' lack of sensitivity.

"They were just so uneducated in terms of dealing with victims," Kate said. "I'm sure they'd never dealt with it before."

She said that one of them wanted to know what she had been wearing the night of the incident, a question Kate described as "text book don't-ask-that."

Kate also had a rape kit done at St. Luke's, which yielded positive physical evidence for rape: tearing and bleeding in her rectum. Kate asked the hospital for a copy of the physical report and submitted it to the deans. She believes this helped her win the case.

The deans did find Jeremy guilty, and he was suspended from Columbia for a year.

But Kate does not feel she found justice, especially two years later, with Jeremy back at the University.

"Columbia always preaches about their security and safety. Security yes ... the phone booths, lamp lights, the guards ... but safety is different to me. I'm not safe here ... because there's this guy walking around that did something terrible to [me] ... I have to bump into him at Butler. I see him at the gym."

Kate is ambivalent about the extent to which Jeremy should have been punished.

More than 1/2 of raped college women tell no one of their victimization. [Koss, Woodruff, & Koss, 1990]

She believes in redemption, that Jeremy might have received counseling while he was away and return a better person. But she can't shake her feelings of fear that he may harm her again.

"I think [the deans] failed in terms of injustice. If you're going to find someone guilty, you can't just find them partially guilty. And I think this is where the issue of education come in with deans discipline ... so that they can know how to deal with victims."



Dean A insisted "There's never been an accusation of sexual assault when [the dean involved] did not have experience with that kind of thing." He added that "Nothing is treated as seriously and with thought and care as that kind of accusation."

He said that he has supported a change in the Sexual Misconduct Policy, not because he didn't feel deans aren't doing their job, but because he wanted to make sure that it was

easier for survivors of assault to come forward.

Dean B, a Task Force member in the revisions of Dean's Discipline, said that "Certainly, some deans are more suited than others for participation in this kind of case, which is why the Task Force has said that particular deans should be selected and trained to be part of this specific procedure."

She sympathized with the assault survivors: "These kinds of cases are the hardest possible, no-win situations... It just doesn't please all the people all the time—ever," she said.

"In sexual assault cases... the survivor has

84% of college students who were victims of completed rapes knew their assailant and 2/3 of them were assaulted by a date [Koss, Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, March 1987]

usually experienced great, life-changing, trauma. Even to get to the point of making an allegation is enormously painful, and it is understandable that he or she may feel that deans, in an attempt to be objective, are not supportive," she said.

Coping: Eyes on the Future

"Sexual assault is a life-changing event. I've heard people describing the event as being like their lives are shattered," Bairley, program coordinator for the Barnard/Columbia Rape Crisis Center said.

None of the three women have told their parents, nor do they intend to. They have shared their secret with only their closest friends.

For Melissa, her experience has not been especially damaging. "For a while I think it trivialized sex in and of itself," she reflected.

"It's taken me time to grow on my own. I have a steady boyfriend now... I don't think about it now. Now I'm having a good experience—there's none of the negative parts."

She is in a quandary over her stake in what happened.

"I claim responsibility also," she said. "I chose to drink... I think that's where the guilt comes from. I think of myself as responsible enough to drink and therefore responsible for my actions."

But she doesn't blame herself entirely. "It seems like it would be common sense not to take advantage of someone who is drunk and can't make rational decisions for themselves, but it doesn't always happen that way."

If she had it to do over Melissa feels she could not go through Dean's Discipline. "It would be a losing battle: if I did, nothing would get done. I felt guilty, so it would have been hard for me to accuse him because it's not wholeheartedly."

Kate also struggles with self-blame. "I lost my innocence through it. And there's a certain amount of shame and fault on my part that I can't quite forgive myself for. It took me a year and a half to say to myself 'it wasn't your fault.'"

She says she was "in denial" for the year following the incident, which went smoothly until April, when Take Back the Night uncovered a host of emotions which Kate had been hiding from herself.

"I fell apart," she said. "I was a mess. I had all this repressed energy," she said.

To help herself cope, Kate spent a brief period in therapy, which she felt wasn't for her, preferring to seek solace in spirituality, writ-

ing, and poetry.

"They help me cry," Kate said. "Sometimes you just feel bad and you remember things at the most inopportune times, and you just want to go to the bathroom and cry. And when I dance, or I pray, or I write, it's like an outward crying and I feel like I can move forward."

Phoebe no longer drinks as a result of her experience. She has not had a serious boyfriend in the two years since. "I don't trust guys—I definitely have issues," she said.

To help herself deal with the experience, Phoebe is involved with SAFER, helping in their efforts to improve the Sexual Misconduct Policy. She feels optimistic that there will be change.

"Now that the sexual misconduct policy is under revision, victims of sexual assault will hopefully be able to experience a fairer procedure and will not need to resort to Dean's

Discipline. The reason for why I chose Dean's Discipline was because I did not feel comfortable using the Sexual Misconduct Policy two years ago." She added that "although there have been changes to the sexual misconduct policy, we as students still need to address the fundamental problems that lie within Dean's Discipline."

Columbia Community Support Services

■ Barnard-Columbia Rape Crisis / Anti-Violence Support Center
123 Brooks Hall-Barnard Quad

Hours: 7pm-10pm,
Tuesday-Sunday

854-HELP

Peer Advocates:

24 hours, every day

854-WALK

■ Counseling and Psychological Services

Barnard: 854-2091

Columbia: 854-2468

Health Sciences: 795-4181

■ Nightline: 854-7777

■ Gay Health Advocacy Program
854-2468

■ Columbia Presbyterian Rape Crisis Intervention Program
305-9060

■ Domestic Violence Hotline
(800) 621-HOPE (24 hrs)

■ Police: Sex Crimes
267-RAPE (24 hrs)

■ St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Crime Victims' Treatment Center
523-4728

■ Alice! Health Education
854-5452
www.Alice.columbia.edu