

Published January 15th, 2014

The Unnamed Conspirator

Film and panel discussion shed light on sexual assault victim blaming

By Sophie Braccini



Anne Munch Photo provided

Anne Munch speaks from experience about the culture of victim blaming in incidents of sexual assault. As a career prosecutor, she first identified the 'unnamed conspirator' - a third party who influences sexual assault cases and can be the biggest factor in determining the fate of the alleged victims and perpetrators at trial. The unnamed conspirator is society in general.

In a powerful documentary, "Sexual Assault, Naming the Unnamed Conspirator," Munch explains the cultural myths at work and forces audience members to question their own biases. The documentary will be shown Jan. 26 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. Following the film a diverse panel will answer questions from the audience and discuss ways to reverse the trend of blaming rape victims for an assault.

When Diane Bell-Rettger - then president of the Orinda/Moraga/Lafayette branch of the American Association of University Women - first saw the documentary, she felt compelled to get support from all the local branches of the organization to show the movie to as large an audience as possible. "We women have been

educated to take the brunt of the responsibility when such a crime happens," says Bell-Rettger. "By showing this video we hope to challenge some of the assumptions people have."

According to Munch, when a woman is attacked jurors tend to require proof that the victim is blameless and innocent; proof of the assault is not enough. "Some jurors disregard evidence and decide rape cases based on their perceptions over the victim's character and lifestyle," says Munch. "Look at alcohol: if the perpetrator is intoxicated, would you see it as an excuse or an aggravating factor? Most of the time, jurors will see it as an excuse. As for the victim, if she is intoxicated, that will count against her."

In a Times/CNN poll, 38 percent of men and 37 percent of women said that a raped woman is partially to blame if she dresses provocatively, says Munch.

In the documentary, Munch is specific and graphic when explaining some of the cases, and cites other sobering statistics: In a study that polled more than 6,000 students at 32 colleges, "20 percent of college aged women experience rape or attempted rape during college." Most people when thinking of sexual assault fear the lurking aggressor hidden in the bushes, but more than 80 percent of rape victims know the perpetrator, she says.

According the same college study, the perpetrators represent about 6 percent of male students, who will assault girls four to six times during their stay in college. And while they will admit to the behavior that constitutes the legal definition of rape, 88 percent of them will deny that their behavior was indeed rape. "They don't see themselves as doing anything wrong because they don't have a weapon and they don't jump out of an alley," says Munch.

Munch gives several examples, including recordings of actual 911 calls that show even victims blame themselves. What is surprising, Munch notes, is that women jurors are no more sympathetic to victims. In fact she cites a case that was dismissed because two of the women jurors thought since the victim was walking by herself at night, she must have been 'looking for it.'

"Women are so shocked by these cases that maybe they need to find faults in the victims," explains Munch, "that way they may feel that if they (or their daughters) don't do anything 'wrong' nothing will happen to them."

The expert panel will include the Contra Costa County deputy district attorney in charge of sexual assault as well as the director of Community Violence Solutions (a rape crisis center), says Bell-Rettger. "Men and women will be invited to ask questions and brainstorm what we can do to change the culture."

The free event will be held from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, 3491 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette.

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