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UBC sexual assaults prompt calls for education

Campus sexual assault is 'an epidemic,' says actor, advocate

By Aleksandra Sagan, CBC News | Posted: Oct 26, 2013 2:00 AM PT | Last Updated: Oct 26, 2013 2:32 AM PT



Over a three-week period, three women have reported sexually motivated attacks by a stranger at Vancouver's University of British Columbia. (CBC)



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A string of recent stranger sexual assaults at Vancouver's University of British Columbia can be an opportunity for the university to educate students and address the larger issue of campus rape culture, say experts and alumni.

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Over a three-week period, three women have reported sexually motivated attacks by a stranger, perhaps the same man. In the latest incident, a 17-year-old student escaped with a bruised eye and ripped clothing after a man attempted to drag her into a nearby wooden area.

University officials and the RCMP have responded swiftly. UBC amped up its Safewalk program, ensured all campus emergency phones work and handed out safety whistles to students — all while ensuring those on campus are informed about the assaults by holding meetings in residences and posting information online.

Meanwhile, the RCMP promises the attempted assaults are a top priority for the university's detachment.

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Sexual assault 'happens every single day'

While everybody seems to agree the strong reactive measures are positive and necessary, some recent alumni are beginning to wonder about long-term solutions and how the university will address the larger issue of much more frequent acquaintance sexual assault.

"It's not just one person on campus sexually assaulting people," said Taylor Loren, a 23-year-old recent graduate. "A lot of these [people] that are making these comments their friends ... may have taken advantage of a girl when she was drunk or put something in her drink."

Only 18 per cent of sexual assaults occur between strangers, according to Statistics Canada, and survivors report less than one in 10 attacks - making UBC's recent wave of attacks the exception rather than the norm.

"This happens every single day on our campus," says Ginny Monaco, a 22-year-old who will be graduating in November.

Loren and Monaco both say they have female friends who were sexually assaulted during their university days and neither of their friends reported the attacks to the police.

The women agree that the problem is not unique to UBC, but exists across North American school campuses. Recent American cases, like the one in [Steubenville, Ohio](#), where two high-school football players were found guilty of raping a drunk 16-year-old girl, strengthen their assertion.

Dispel myths, place the onus on men

Meghan Gardiner is a UBC alumni, actor and date-rape survivor. She melded all three identities into her fine arts career when she wrote and started performing in a one-woman show about her experience with sexual assault.

For years, Gardiner has toured schools across North America performing the at times comedic, but sobering routine, which features Gardiner playing every role as a young woman discovers she was date raped the night before.

"Campus sexual assault has become an epidemic," she says. "I've been in the business for 11 years and have toured the continent with my show. I can tell you first hand that this is a serious problem."

Gardiner stresses she is impressed with the official response to the assaults so far, but says UBC now has the opportunity to educate people and raise awareness.

Gardiner, who has been in contact with university officials, says she is confident the university recognizes the long-term systemic issues that need to be addressed.

"We believe education is the key to changing individual and group behaviour," wrote Janet Mee, the director of UBC's Access & Diversity office. "We recognize this is an opportunity for a renewed focus on education and dialogue."

Education programs need to focus on increasing the likelihood of bystander intervention and dispelling basic myths, explains Gardiner.

'It's not just one person on campus sexually assaulting people.'

- Taylor Loren, former UBC student



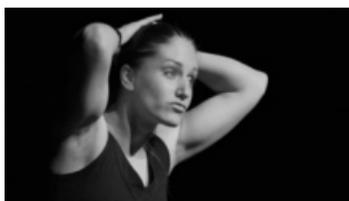
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Actor and advocate Meghan Gardiner wrote a one-woman show, Dissolve, about her experience with date rape at university. (Meghan Gardiner/Dissolve)

The university's sexual assault support centre outlines more than 20 myths on its website. One of the most notable, says Gardiner, is blaming the victim.

Further, instead of simply providing women with preventative measures, some of the onus should be placed on the men.

"Men need to engage other men," she says. "Men need to publicly condemn sexualized violence."

Mandatory sessions needed

More than 20 years ago, John Foubert recognized the need for campus sexual assault education and co-founded One in Four, a research-based rape prevention program.

It is one of several programs that offers single-gender rather than co-educational sessions on campus. A single-sex environment makes men more receptive to the message.

He agrees with Gardiner that this is an opportunity for UBC to further sexual assault education on campus and calls it "a galvanizing moment."

Ideally, he says, a university would bring in a guest speaker, such as Gardiner or One in Four, and make the session mandatory for all students.

A university is "making excuses," he says, if they claim the sessions can't be mandatory. Officials can require students to attend a session before allowing them to register for the next semester's courses.

Going one step further, he says, universities should train a group of student leaders to continue sexual assault education on campus.

It appears to be the type of action the university community wants and expects.

"I really think the university could benefit from suspending classes for even, even just one hour to send students to a sensitivity lecture," says Monaco, a former student. "I think it would be amazing to see what that could do."



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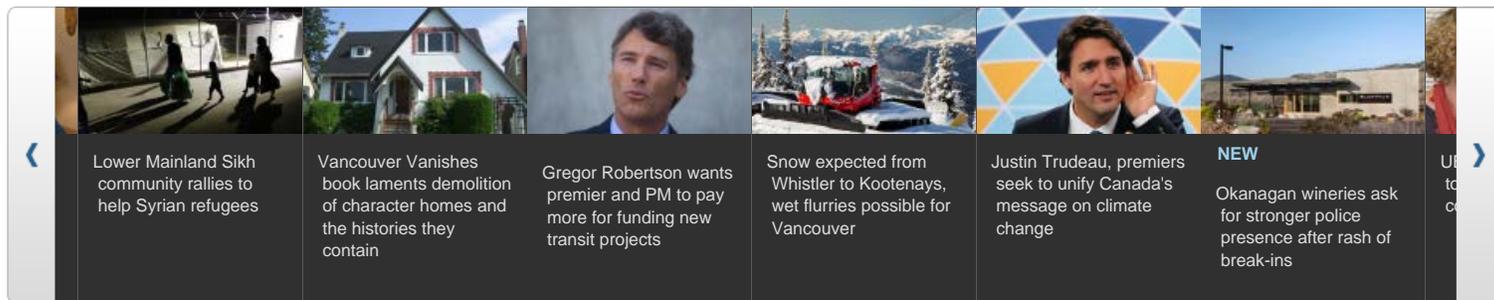
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