

Interview with Morgan Grady-Benson (She/Her/Hers) - May 4, 2020



When were you a student at Middlebury?

I graduated in May of 2018.

What did you study?

I studied Feminist and Gender Studies. I loved it, best major.

And how would you describe campus culture at the time that you were a student?

Hm, yeah, that's a good question. I think that, um, we were a pretty divided campus, especially at the time after the Charles Murray, um, protest [*On March 2, 2017, Charles Murray, a controversial sociologist whose work is widely considered racist, came to Middlebury to give a talk. Students at Middlebury protested and shut down the lecture. Administration issued punishments of varying severity to 74 students*]. Things shifted a little bit or became more palpable in terms of, um, a little bit of a us vs. them kind of dissent culture, uh, especially with the administration. Um, so I think that when I was there my junior and senior year, um, there was a lot of disillusionment amongst students that I was with, but I think that that probably varied amongst social groups. Yeah, and again I think that maybe that created again a more, um, separated campus too, for those who were involved in activism and those who were not.

And what was your experience on campus, just broadly?

My experience on campus? Well, yeah, I mean being at Middlebury was wonderful in a lot of ways, like awesome classes, like access to, um, incredible resources academically, um, socially it was, I had a lot of amazing friends. But I think that mental health wise it was not a great place to be and I think a lot of people around me struggled. Um, and I think that that was a product of, um, a lot of disillusionment with administration and also, um, probably just a time in a lot of people's lives. It's tough being at Middlebury, you know, it's a high pressure environment and pretty isolated. Um, so that definitely was felt by many people around me and also by me.

Were you part of any organizations on campus?

Yeah so I was, um, one of the heads of It Happens Here [*anti-sexual violence campaign that collects anonymous student stories to raise awareness and give survivors a voice*] when I was there. Um, and I also was one of the, um, founders per say of Stares on Stairs. So I was heavily involved with those things. Um, I also was a spin instructor with YouPower [*Student led indoor spinning classes at Middlebury*] which was a fun time. Um, not something I expected to be involved with but, *laughs* yeah. So I did that as well. Oh and I did WRMC, Middlebury College Radio.

Okay, so you mentioned that you were part of IHH and Stares on Stairs which are, you know, clearly feminist activist groups. What prompted you to act or join or found those things? Were they issues you wanted to involve yourself in on campus, or did you see problems and that's kind of what inspired you guys to act?

Yeah, well with Stares on Stairs, um, that kind of started from a class that I took my sophomore year. It was called, um, oh man what was it exactly called? I'd have to go back and look at the exact title, but um, Lida Winfield who's one of the dance professors, um, she had a J-term class where it was basically, um, performance and social justice. And so from that one of our goals was to, you know, see a change on campus. And so a few of us started this organization, I mean, thinking about cultures of violence and specifically, you know, misogyny and homophobia and racism and all those things and how they kind of coalesce into sexual violence was definitely something that I felt passionate about and it felt really personal to me. And I've always been really interested in different ways of protest and artistic, um, activism. And, um, like use of the body always seemed like something that, um, was missing in some ways at Middlebury and felt like there was a lot of potential for power, um, in that. So that's kind of what led to that and made me feel, um, I guess really made me feel like I was making some kind of an impact. And I think, you know, at Middlebury as in any college there's, you know, sexual violence is rampant to be honest and I think the first target that we had was looking at Atwater [*Suites and dorms often belonging to athletes, sometimes referred to as "frat-water" by students for it's fraternity-like party scene*] because, I mean, they're notorious when you come in as a freshman as some place where, you know, there are these wild parties, um, it can be pretty predatory. And so that was our

initial aim, was to look at Atwater parties and kind of honestly a lot of like pretty bro-ey like toxic white masculine spaces. Which seemed to kind of be, um, condensed in some ways or like represented by that one space. Um, but then we looked farther out into other places on campus. Um, and then for IHH I got involved with that...I guess that was my junior year and I believe honestly it was through Karin that I was led in that direction. And I'd always attended IHH, um, events in the past and found them really meaningful and moving. Um, and I felt that storytelling again is like a really important way to create change and especially you know personal narrative storytelling is really powerful. Like having testimony I think, bearing witness, and, um, bringing people into a place of discomfort is a great tool I think to unearth, um, toxic violent culture, um, and make people reflect on how they participate in that. Um, and so I was definitely drawn to IHH for that reason and that was also a lot of the basis of Stares on Stairs too, is making people see what's in front of them and not bury, uh, the ways that their actions are contributing to a larger, yeah, larger violence. Um, yeah so then, um, my senior year I started, I was one of the leaders and organizers of the event. And yeah, again that felt like a way to give survivors a voice too, which I think is important so it's both about creating change but also, um, allowing for healing. I think that that's a key part of It Happens Here.

You said that you joined It Happens Here your junior year and you were an organizer your senior year?

Yes.

And in terms of Stares on Stairs you said you were one of the founders, when did you guys found it?

So that was my sophomore year which would be, um, January so it would be 2016.

What was the culture around sexual assault like while you were a student at Middlebury?

Yeah, I mean I think like I said in every college its a huge issue. Um, and you know I kept hearing stories and stories of, um, people who had experienced sexual assault at Middlebury and, you know, had not gotten the support that they needed or had not felt like they were listened to by college administration. You know, just through friends or acquaintances people talked about experiences that they'd had at parties, you know, um, or experiences their friends had had at parties. You know we all hear about these things but never often really dig deeper into it. Um, so that, you know, no matter how much was happening like it still felt like an issue that needed to be tackled. So that's how it felt when I was there for sure. And I'm sure that it still feels that way too, to be honest.

Were there outside movements or events going on in the world or at Middlebury that impacted the work that you were doing?

Um, yeah that's a good question. I mean Me Too was happening, you know, my senior year I guess and junior year. That definitely you know had, carried a lot of weight in terms of any activism around sexual violence and relationship violence. It also, you know, specifically looking at IHH it really fits in with that Me Too narrative. In terms of other things one of the, um, one of the drives or inspiration behind Stares on Stairs was definitely this, uh, performance called Carry That Weight, which is a woman who went to Columbia who did this performance art activist. Um, I don't know if you've heard about it, she carried a mattress around her campus in protest. And so that definitely felt like inspiration to do more performance based type of activism. So, yeah, also my senior year one of my friends and co-activists, they posted The List, um, which was a huge dramatic deal on campus where they posted names of people who, um, were named as sexual offenders or predators on campus. Um, and so that also became a huge, um, huge fuel I guess in Middlebury's culture or activist culture specifically around sexual assault.

What was the experience of having The List posted, being kind of in a group of feminist activists, being closely tied to people who were experiencing the fallout of that?

So like how did I respond to it? Or what were my emotions around it?

Yeah.

Yeah I mean that felt complicated because Liz, who posted, they you know were one of my friends and I was really concerned about their safety to be honest. There was a lot of, um, they experienced a lot of pretty harsh backlash and you know a lot of angry people and the administration was not pleased with them, um, in terms of violating you know codes of conduct at Middlebury. So a lot of my reaction was in fear for Liz, um, and it also felt complicated because I think that there's something really powerful about naming, you know, it goes along with the Me Too movement right? Like if we name these predators they're brought to light. Also, you know, there's an issue in terms of fear for retaliation against those that might have named the predators or those who had, um, been involved with the predators but hadn't named them, but so what kind of response those people would...would have and how that could then lead to more violence. So that was definitely something that went through my head. But in general I mean it was also pretty inspiring, you know, to make a bold move like that in such a small place. That kind of a risk is pretty admirable and I think it did have an impact on the community that made Middlebury students and faculty really think about who among us, um, was perpetrating violence and how those who we might call friends could be someone that's involved, um, in that violent culture. I think it made a lot of people reflect and so, even for myself you know, I had to, it really opened up that avenue to looking at those that I was surrounding myself with. So that's kind of my, my reaction to that.

And do you know how the names on The List got collected?

Yeah, so Liz was collecting them, um, by asking people to message them on social media. Um, so it always went through Liz first, people weren't just posting. And Liz's policy was, you know, if you name a name then we believe you, we're going to post the name. Um, and that also led to a lot of controversy because you know of course people who perpetrate violence are going to deny that they perpetrate violence right? And it is messy right? But yeah that was their, um, method, was to have people message them directly. And then it would be anonymous, like they didn't put up, you now, so-and-so said...named this person.

And do you know around how many names were on the final list?

Ooh man. There were definitely dozens of names. Um, more and more kept, kept coming out. The whole thing lasted probably about a week, um, maybe less before it really got shut down. Um, but yeah at least dozens of names were coming up.

They posted like an original list and then they were adding names, is that what you said?

Mhm, yeah. So first it was on Facebook, and then I believe it moved to a Tumblr page.

I'd like to talk more about your involvement with IHH and Stares on Stairs. In terms of IHH, what did being part of IHH or organizing an event look like?

Um, yeah. So we definitely built on past models. Um, so part of organizing the events, you know, creating posters, booking the space, making sure that we had the technical support to, um, display the powerpoint and have the microphone ready. And then, you know, also being able to reach out and find people who wanted to tell stories, you know, that's part of...the biggest part of the event obviously is finding people who want to participate. And then also being able to make sure that those people had the option to either read themselves or have someone else read it. Um, and you know, we didn't edit anything that people said, that felt really important to us in creating the event cause we wanted people to feel like they're voices were maintained even if they weren't reading it themselves. Um, yeah, and then after that, you know, making sure that, you know, those stories were going to be archived as well. So that's kind of the broad layout of how we planned it.

How would you go about finding the people that wanted to tell stories?

Yeah, well a lot of people would honestly come up to me individually, um, people that I knew. I think that like doing that kind of work I felt like we had pretty, um, like people knew who we were and how we were involved in activism, like anti-sexual assault activism. Um, but also you know we would get emails, we also had like a go-link [*A system of short URLs that can be used while on campus*] where people could put their stories in anonymously. So it really depended on the comfort of the person, but we wanted to be able to have options for how they opted into the experience.

And what would the event itself look like? How were the stories told? Um, how many people came?

Yeah, so, um, we would have it in Wilson [*Wilson hall is an event space in the student center that holds maximum 600 people standing and has 400 seats*] and, um, basically we'd have a podium on the stage and we'd project the stories, um, we had them written out as well so they'd be projected on a screen in front of the auditorium. Um, and that allowed for multiple ways of engaging, you want to make sure that it's as successful as possible so you can both hear the story being read as well as read it. And I mean I think accessibility is important for any type of activism and any type of information sharing. So yeah we, um, we also had...part of the organizing the event was finding people who would want to be readers too, and a lot of people were just, you know, we'd get through cultural orgs; we'd put out messages to them to both get people to send stories if they wanted or to volunteer to be part of the actual event. So we'd have our readers in the back, um, like backstage and then we'd come out one by one to read the stories that we were assigned. And before that we also had rehearsals too so people felt comfortable with the words and felt like they could read it, um, smoothly. You know there was a lot of emotion too that went into that, you'd have to be, there was a lot of support that we needed to give each other in order to read the stories even if they weren't your own. Um, so we definitely worked in time to do that as well. Um, and then in terms of number of people who came it really depended. So we did it, you know, several times a year. Um, so I believe my, the first event my junior year, you know there were probably a couple hundred people in there, I remember as a freshman I couldn't even get a seat it would be so packed. And then when I was a senior there were far less so, and I mean I'm terrible at guessing numbers to be honest but you know like if you look at Wilson, probably, like it would be a half to three quarters full generally my senior year. And that's also interesting information too, it's like, okay um, how much attention do we have from the public you know? And what's reaching people and what's not? Um, how engaged are people in this issue? Like it's all data in some ways. And I think for a lot of people it's like, well I've heard it once I don't need to hear it again. So then again that's data, like how do we change our methods or how do we keep a model that is powerful while also making it, um, making it grow too. So those are questions too and I think for activists doing that work on campus.

Were there other things that went into IHH besides the actual performance? I've interviewed some other people who've been involved with it over the years and some of them said there were like installation pieces that they would put up on campus or other types of activism that kind of went along with the actual performance?

Yeah, um, when I was there we...we also put up a board in the library, in the entrance, that would have some of the stories posted so that people could engage with it that way, you know, especially for people who weren't able to go to the actual event. Um, and that's pretty meaningful

I think, especially since the library's such a public space and, you know, it's a little bit more in your face. Other than that I don't recall us having more events around it.

How often did you guys do the performance?

So we did one in, I guess did we just do it twice? We did one in J-term. Um, and then I believe we did once in the spring also, so I guess that was twice.

In terms of Stares on Stairs, um, you said you started in a J-term class, how many people were originally involved?

Um, originally, probably around 10 people were involved but then only three of us kind of, um, made it happen I guess, um, or we continued the model. Um, so it was definitely like a bigger class effort to create the idea and practice some ways to execute it and then, yeah, three of us continued on, you know, through multiple different performances

Who were the other founders?

Um, Chi Chi Chang who's also in my year. Um, and then Nel Seether, or I guess there were four of us. Nel Seether who was a year below me. And then Liz Dunn who was also my year. Liz was the one who posted The List.

Can you kind of describe what a performance of Stares on Stairs would look like?

Yeah so, um, every time we'd have a different group of performers. Um, and we would try to seek new performers out specifically to portray the fact that, you know, sexual assault doesn't just affect one small group of people, it can affect, you know, a wide community within Middlebury. Um, and so we would talk to cultural orgs, we would, you know through word of mouth find people who wanted to be involved. As we gained more traction, more and more people would come to us and be interested. And so beforehand we'd always have a training meeting where we'd practice scenarios, um, basically we always had, um, we had four performers and then we'd have bodyguards with them. Um, so we'd usually have two people with them to make sure that, first of all they weren't physically harmed and also that, um, you know they had people to hand out materials. So, um, we handed out pamphlets with, um, information about Stares on Stairs, um, as well as, um, some statistics around sexual assault and, um, information about where you can get help if you've been affected by sexual assault. Um, we would always let Public Safety [*Uniformed campus security officers*] know, um, that we were going to be doing a performance, and also we'd let MiddSafe [*MiddSafe is a student run hotline and advocacy program for sexual assault, stalking, dating violence, etc. MiddSafe works closely with the administration*] know that we were doing a performance just because you know it can bring up things for people. Um, yeah, sorry I'm jumping around a little bit but we would have, um, a practice training meeting beforehand. Um, and we would decide who was going to be a bodyguard and who was going to be one of the people in the various stages of dress. So we'd

have someone who was just in their underwear, someone who was, you know, partial underwear partial clothing, um, someone who was fully dressed, um, were there only three of us? Wow my memory is so terrible.

In the pictures it looked like four usually.

Yeah, yeah. There were four of us. I'm trying to think, yeah and I guess each person decided what kind of level of clothing they wanted to have, you know. So that wasn't mandated that you had to look a certain way but the point was to have various stages of dress to, um, kind of exemplify that it doesn't matter what you're wearing, it doesn't matter what you look like, you're not asking for it. We also had purple, um, body paint that we would put handprints on our bodies to show sexual assault leaves a mark, which is something that we would say. Um, and yeah then the, you know, the four of us who did the planning we would decide where we were going to, um, do our next performance. And in some cases that was just pop-up, like when we'd go to Atwater, we didn't really ask for any permission. Um, but if we went to like a social house...we went to the Mill, we went to a couple of the other social houses...we would talk to the people who lived there, um, to get permission for us to be there and sometimes that created conflict, you know, sometimes they said no. But then there were actually a lot of people too that were interested in you know, um, shedding a light and being involved in that. And then in terms of navigating the flow of people we always had signs at the beginning, or either side, of the installation giving people an alternative route because we wanted to make sure that it was something you could opt into. Even though we wanted it to be in your face we also knew that there were people who could be triggered by that. Um, and so in Atwater, you know, we would...we would try to lead people to the elevator or to a different stairwell if they wanted to get to a party but didn't want to go through us. Um, yeah, let me see: yeah we also you know we got some backlash, you know like a lot of people were really angry. We got, um, a lot of really angry comments during the performance and after the performance, and those were things that we recorded too. So we'd have small breaks in between, um, you know we'd be in the installation for like fifteen minutes and then we'd go for a break and check in with each other. Like that was a big thing, um, that we really wanted to focus on was creating like a culture of care amongst us that wasn't maybe, um, seen in our larger community you know. Like if we want to target violence then we have to build the community that we envision on a smaller scale, you know, that felt important to us. And then also, you know, by allowing everyone to have a voice in how they're feeling and share back their experiences in the performance, that felt really meaningful and also allowed us to connect on many levels. Um, and we always said you know if someone, if there was even one person who didn't want to continue then we wouldn't, we'd stop, we'd end for the night. But we always did a pre performance meet up where we did a centering and talked about, you know, how are you feeling going into the performance. And then we always did a post performance reflection too. Um, so that's kind of how we laid it out, um, we also had a blog where, you know, people who participated could write about their experiences there and

reflections and then that would be, you know, obviously posted online. Um, which was a pretty great way to record what was happening and, you know, the culture that we were seeing on campus. Um, we had some very interesting experiences, we tried to go to Rites of Spring [*An invite-only party held every spring by Middlebury's secret societies/fraternities*], this was my junior year *laughs.*

Want to explain what that is?

Yeah, so Rites of Spring is, um, it's a party, it's a formal that happens in the spring, and it's thrown by, um, one or it's thrown by the secret fraternities at um, or is it sororities? Pretty sure it's fraternities...secret greek life at Middlebury. They would throw this party every spring and it was at this alpaca farm [*Champlain Valley Alpacas*], I'm sure that it's still happening. But um yeah, and it was a very exclusive party, so you know you had to be asked by a member of the fraternity and you know mostly it was a collection of white wealthy people who were involved in this greek structure. Um, and so we found that problematic in the ways that um like greek life, especially hidden greek life, you know, is this epitome of um racial, class, like dominance you know at Middlebury. And how, um, how being asked to this event was supposed to be some sort of a, um, a compliment but often was, you know, when you look at it broadly a pretty predatory event. Um, so anyway we tried to go and protest it *laughs* and first of all we like *laughs* when we were driving there we hit a turley *laughs* on the way. Like it was just like a *laughs* a bad omen, I don't know why I'm saying that, but it was you know, it was a funny time. Anyway we got there and, um, we got kicked off of the farm by the owner and he told us that he would call the police, so we didn't actually get to go. Um, but we did, we made flyers that we put up around campus with information about why Rites of Spring was a problem, again more information about Stares on Stairs and, um, resources. So even though we couldn't go to the farm, um, we still were spreading information that way. We also, um, got some flack from other social houses that we went to who were not pleased with the way that we, um, criticized the cultures there. Which is you know, that's part of the game right? If you allow us to come into your space you have to be ready for us to critique your space.

What types of, um, critiques or social houses were you going to and what kind of things were they saying?

Yeah well, one that stands out to me is at the Mill. Um, we had a really negative experience there. Um, a lot of really poor, um, pretty aggressive interactions with party goers and with the people who lived in the house. Um, and I wrote a kind of inflammatory blog about it, how like, even though the Mill portrays itself as some kind of alternative space it doesn't make it less violent, and gave examples of some of the things that we'd experienced there. And, um, members of the Mill got really angry, um, and yeah wanted me to take the blog down. Um, didn't want me to, um, to see any of the people in the house...things like that.

What types of things did you experience there that you wrote about?

Um, mostly about things that people were saying to us. Um, I don't remember specifically any of the experiences. I mean that was four years ago. I can send you the blog too. Yeah you know people, it didn't matter like what, you know, what segment of campus you identified with, a lot of people were affected and a lot of people got angry. But that's part of the whole reason that we are doing it right, like anger can be productive, like if you're angry why are you angry? You know, um, how can we work with that? Um, you know how can we build that anger from a place of just pure emotion to, um, like shifting away from complacency?

You mentioned that you did trainings for people before they would participate. What did the training consist of?

Yeah so we would do a lot of, um, imitations of different scenarios that we'd either experienced in the past or could anticipate. Um, so we would practice, um, having the bodyguards talk to you know angry, drunk, students. We'd have bodyguards practice how to talk to people that were more interested, um to people who might want to be involved. Try to get the narrative that we wanted to, um, to pass on, get it straight for people. We'd practice the um, the sign holders, you know, being yelled at and how and like try to process those emotions, you know before they might happen. The whole point of the sign holders was for them to be silent and not have to do the interacting on more than a physical level. So those were, that was kind of what we would do for training and, um, also have people who had done it before relate back stories, um, the point was to make people feel comfortable and confident as much as possible and you know start to build the community, the close knitted, um, community that was necessary to really support each other and feel like we'd made, um, a difference. Yeah like I've said before, if you don't have that, then...you're not going to create any change I think.

How was the emotional experience for you, or other sign holders or bodyguards, to kind of put yourself out there especially when your getting that backlash in the moment?

Yeah, I mean it was hard. For me I think that it felt empowering. Um, I think it felt like a reclamation of my body to be able to put myself in a scenario where I was choosing...I was choosing to be dressed in this way, I was choosing to be seen in this way, so it felt healing to me. Um, and I know that it felt that way for others too. Um, but also yeah, there were a lot of, there was a lot of processing that was necessary, you know, a lot of tears a lot of, you know, a lot of times it felt shitty. It really depended and you could never anticipate what kind of reactions we were going to get and how that would impact us. Um, we always ended up having a buddy, we'd have people choose a buddy to check in with after the performance, you know, and be there for each other in the days following. Um, so there was always a mixture of kind of this feeling of strength and pride in some ways and this mixture of like despair in some ways. You know, it's like wow this is what's happening on our campus, this is what people think is okay to say to me or to say to each other, um, or to interact with just another human. And so even though we knew

theoretically that that was true, like experiencing it on that level felt different and felt, um, was angering you know and scary. Like people would, you know, say pretty like violent shit to us. Like one time, um, this guy said to one of my, I was one of the signholders, and said to one of my bodyguards that if I thought sexual assault was a problem, like, he'd rape me. You know what I mean, like things like that. And like you think, "Oh, we're at this prestigious liberal arts college, you know, everyone is so politically, um, in tune or..." I don't know, like we're all supposed to be like supporting each other. You know, that's kind of like the whole idea that liberal arts colleges portray as like "Oh we're one big community, where we all are, um, here for each other and supporting each other and love each other," you know? And that's just not the truth.

How would you react in a situation like that?

Um, yeah. I mean, I think that that's tricky. Because getting angry in response isn't necessarily productive, um, I mean, yeah it's hard. Oftentimes, you know, the bodyguards would try to create discussion around that and, you know, and be like "You know, why do you feel like that's, like why do you think that that's your reaction?" or you know, "If you want to talk about this more we're going to have a post performance discussion." So we always had, um, scheduled, um, meetings for after in case people wanted to come and talk to us about it. Nobody ever came. Um, but, yeah the strategy was never to escalate, it was always to inform and work with people's anger, but you know sometimes that's difficult.

How many performances do you think you guys did?

Um, probably throughout my time we probably did about like 10-12. Yeah different places on campus. Um, and yeah different events too. Like we did one at, um, I guess that's the spring concert, my junior year also. So we'd pick, we'd try to be strategic and try to spread it out over campus but um, you know, also try to find a way to plan things that were going to be strategic and, um, impactful but also not, um, triggering to other people. That was always a fine balance because it's, I don't know, it's a risky thing to do...it's um...it's an inflammatory thing to do.

Would you ever do kind of performances in the same place, did you do multiple ones at Atwater?

Yeah, we did multiple ones at Atwater in particular. Other ones like the social houses we moved around.

When you guys, you did it for all three years, you did it your sophomore, junior and senior year?

Yeah, we did less our senior year. There was a lot of, it was a difficult time to organize just for the people who were, you know, planning. Um, everyone had a lot going on in their lives, but yes.

And then did Stares on Stairs kind of end when you guys graduated?

Yeah, I mean I think so. We tried to pass it on to younger people, but I think it kind of fizzled and died honestly, which is unfortunate. I think it's hard to, that's something that I've you know struggled with, like how do you create organizations that have longevity and can like maintain that fire behind it. Um, so it's unfortunate that it...I mean maybe I'm wrong, maybe it's still going on. But from what I've heard it isn't.

You mentioned that you would inform MiddSafe when you guys were going to have a performance. How did they respond to these types of performances?

Yeah, MiddSafe was pretty split on the idea. Um, you know, several of them thought that it was counterproductive, um, or that the risk of triggering survivors was worse than the possible benefits of creating conversation. But not all MiddSafe people felt that way. I know Barbara McCall felt that way. But, I mean we also had MiddSafe representatives who were part of, you know, our organization. So, yeah, I mean it definitely, it wasn't clear cut. To me, it felt like the right thing to do, to me it felt like an opportunity to push something forward cause in a lot of ways I think It Happens Here is great but it didn't feel like enough. You know, because like where does that then go? Like we tell survivor's stories which is important and we give them a voice, but then what happens next? I felt like we needed something that was a little bit more... targeted a different audience who maybe was not going to It Happens Here. That's the other thing, you know, you end up getting a lot of the same people to come to events like It Happens Here. And that's, I'm not saying it's not valuable, like obviously I think it's so valuable but I wanted to engage a broader audience and I do think that Stares on Stairs did that.

Yeah. How would you feel like your class work, if at all, contributed to your feminist activism?

Oh yeah, for sure. I mean, like you're in the department, I think it's wonderful. And I think that the classes that are offered just have so much breadth in thinking about multiple forms of like systems of oppression and how they overlap and, um, also reading about and learning about dissent. I felt like everything that I learned in class was informing the way that I was showing up outside of class. And I think that if I hadn't been in the major I would have a totally different college experience. Like I know for a fact that I learned so much about like possibilities for activism and felt really supported by my professors in that. I felt like they stood behind me in a lot of ways and, um, yeah it...they offered me a way too to look at my own privileges and the ways that I contribute to oppressive systems you know? And like I think in order to do anti-sexual assault activism you need to know that too right? And like, not every survivor is going to look like me and I shouldn't take up that space you know? Like I, my experiences are valid, but also when we're doing this movement that's often seen as just like a white straight woman's movement, how do we make it more broad than that? How do we include people's

experiences that, you know, often aren't seen? So yeah, I think that everything that I learned really was building me as a person, building my activism. I think everyone should be taking GSFS classes.

Did you actively try or did you have people in your organization that weren't white or straight?

Yeah yeah, we did. I mean most of us are queer. But then in terms of finding people of color, black people to involve like we, you know, were pretty deliberate in trying to have a diverse group of people.

You mentioned a fair amount about, kind of, student response to IHH and Stares on Stairs. Um, but if there was anything else feel free to add it. How did administration respond or handle that?

Yeah, so when we first, um, when we first proposed doing it, um, we had to have a meeting with Baishakhi [*Taylor, Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students at the time*] about it and she was very anti Stares on Stairs. We also met with Barbara McCall [*Director of Health and Wellness Education, hired in 2013*] who was also anti Stares on Stairs. But ultimately we weren't going to be breaking any school policy, so, you know what could they say? What could they do? *Laughs,* I just find the administration at Middlebury to be so complacent and so stuck in its ways, you know? And I mean being part of anti-sexual assault activism, you know, really brought that home. And also being part of Charles Murray protest stuff really brought that home. Um, they are way more concerned, I think, about appearances and trustees and, um, you know just classic, kind of, bullshit that they're not really supportive of a lot of student protest, it's against their interest.

Besides kind of originally telling you they were anti Stares on Stairs, did they make any kind of attempt to talk to you guys or shut it down?

No, after that there was no discussion about it. Yeah, which is surprising to me actually. I think that, I think they probably just thought that there were bigger fish to fry *laughs,* my guess. But I don't know.

Did you have any specific mentors or allies in the work that you did?

Yeah, I mean I think like since Stares on Stairs started from my class with Lida Winfield, she was definitely someone that I turned to a lot and who helped me envision, um, ways to express...yeah...dissent from like a bodily place. So she was definitely a mentor, I mean I think that a lot of people in the GSFS department for sure. Um, but I mean it really was like a student led effort, you know? Like we were the ones who were behind it and the ones who were executing it, which I think is also pretty powerful too. Um, like we need support from faculty but also it was, I don't know, it felt empowering to be the ones who were taking the lead, taking

charge. And with IHH, you know, Karin [*Hanta, Director of Chellis House (The Women's Resource Center)*] was just a huge support and advocate for that, so we love Karin *laughs.*

We feel that often feminist activism gets portrayed as only the worst and most negative parts or only the best and most empowering parts. So we've been taking care to ask people what was the best part, and what was the worst part, of your experience in feminist activism at Middlebury?

Mm, yeah. I think the best part was building community and solidarity with other people. I think that I made friendships through that that will last, and I think that's a beautiful thing to connect with somebody over protest and over like a shared goal. Um, and especially a shared goal that's about, you know, caring for one another. Yeah, so I just made such meaningful connections through feminist activism. Um, and then the worst parts I think, like honestly, it was really hard not to sometimes feel powerless you know? Like it's really difficult to get people involved. Um, like I said I mean I met so many great people and formed so many great bonds, but then at some point it becomes the same people who want to do the work and it can feel dismaying when you know there's such a huge system, or such huge systemic issues, like many systemic issues that all relate back to feminism and feeling like we were, like there were times that just felt like a little defeated. But that's how it is in any kind of activism right? Like if things were easy to topple then they would already be toppled you know? If we already had everyone on board then those systems wouldn't exist, so it's just part of the nature of it. But I think that was definitely, yeah, the worst or hardest part.

Did you see any change at Middlebury while you were there do you think?

Um, I think over my time, more people were talking about sexual assault. Yeah, I think that there was generally more, um, of a public awareness. I don't know if it necessarily decreased, I mean the numbers, um, you know don't really suggest...I mean looking at numbers of sexual assault cases on campus is basically bullshit, you know? Because it just depends on who's going to come forward and, you know, tell their story. Um, and that's just so sporadic, so to me, like, when I looked at the numbers it's really hard to gage based on that right? Um, so like all that, the only way that I could gage change was just through the ways people were discussing it. And so I do think that there became, it became more part of general, um, I don't know. I think people started talking about it more. But again hard to, hard to measure. My senior thesis was about sexual or anti-sexual assault activism at Middlebury and a lot of it was trying to gage the efficacy of things that were happening and compare them to like broader national, um, activism and different theories of activism. And, you know, I would like to think that what we were doing there was impactful and I do think it was, but again it's hard to measure.

What do you wish you had known when you were organizing before or what advice would you give to current feminist activists at Middlebury?

Um, things I would wish I had known before...well I know what I would say to feminist activists now at Middlebury. Um, I mean I think I would tell them again that they need to trust in each other, they need to find, um, build their own communities first before trying to change broader community, like I said. I think that, um, I would tell them to not be afraid to be creative with their strategy, that that's really what's important. If we only come at an issue from one angle, you're not going to make headway. Things that I wish I had known, um, I think that I, I think I wish that I had known that, um, it's okay to also care for myself too in doing that kind of organizing and that kind of work. I think I let my own health go first, before anything else. Um, and I think that's probably what a lot of people involved in activism would say, is that they don't put themselves first. Um, and obviously like you shouldn't always put yourself first, but you've got to care for yourself in order to actually show up. And I think that's something that's not taught at Middlebury in any way, like whether it's around activism or it's just around like doing your fucking school work you know? Like who gives a fuck about your paper? Like, you know, take a nap. I don't know. *Laughs.* So I think that like that's something that everyone can learn from, and I think especially activists can learn from that. Yeah, and then being able to communicate that with other people and figuring out who can pick up the slack when. That's something that I wish I had balanced more.

Have you continued to organize elsewhere or after Middlebury?

Yeah, now, um so I live in Seattle, and now I'm part of an organization called Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites, and so we do some like racial justice work organizing white people in the city. I haven't been doing anything around sexual assault. I think, you know it's really different to be involved in social justice work in such like...obviously in college we were so small and you know you're like in a cow field and like you're *laughs* community is just condensed to this one like two acres of land whatever it is. And then being in someplace that's so much more diverse in all the ways and so much bigger, um, I think that yeah it's definitely harder to find ground or find community outside of Middlebury so I think, like, while you're in college like take the opportunity to...to do some shit you know? And not, I mean you can do it after college obviously, but it's like why not start now? That's how I feel, and then, like, gain those skills so that you can then apply them elsewhere.

Is there anything else you wanted to say?

Um, I guess I would just say that like all activism no matter what the issue is, like it's all feminist activism if you're doing it right. So yeah, if you're not a feminist then like get the fuck out of the activist world, you know *laughs.* And also not just like any kind of feminist, like if you're not an intersectional feminist *laughs* get the fuck out...you know *laughs.* Um, yeah, I guess that's all I'll say.

Is there anything else?

Yeah. I was in the Vagina Monologues [*An episodic play written by Eve Ensler about different aspects of womanhood*], super fun experience, you should do it *laughs,* if you're into it.

What was the experience of doing that like?

Well I kind of...I auditioned for it on a whim, um, but yeah cause I'm definitely not an actress, that is not my strong point. But yeah, it was just incredibly community building, incredibly empowering. I think it's really important that it was, you know, Beyond The Vagina Monologues [*Based on Ensler's play, but including more diverse and contemporary ideas of feminism and womanhood*] so it was, you know, not essentialist *laughs.* And yeah, again I think that it's a really important form of activism too right? Cause it's like a different, a different medium and it drew a lot of people. So yeah, I was really glad that I got to be in that. I did, um, I did the My Short Skirt monologue which was fun, yeah. I don't know, I had a lot of fun with it, it's great.

Thank you so much!

No problem, thank you!