

T-shirt is no laughing matter

by Katherine La Sota

Perhaps you are familiar with the t-shirt I'm about to describe. It belongs to the "coed naked lacrosse" genre of violent and sexist sportswear that has been seen on our campus in the past several years. On the front are the words: "Middlebury Co-ed Naked Lacrosse." On the back, underneath the emblem of the two crossed lacrosse sticks, are the words: "IT TAKES A QUICK STICK TO BEAT A TIGHT CREASE." Now, you don't need to be fluent in lacrosse to get the gist of the intended meaning, but just in case you're a little rusty, allow me to spell it out, in its English translation: "If I'm going to rape her, I'd better do it fast, before she says no."

The first time I saw this shirt, I was confused. The second time I saw it, I was offended. The third time I saw it, I was disgusted. Now, after three years of seeing this shirt, my confusion and disgust have turned into outrage. What is going on here? How is it that educated and free-thinking adults, living in a community of supposed liberalism and progressive ideology, come to wear a shirt that is essentially an advertisement advocating rape? Is it that they don't understand what it means to be raped? Think about it... "IT TAKES A QUICK STICK TO BEAT A TIGHT CREASE." It's short and snappy and to the point. The lacrosse jargon coincides perfectly with the appropriate sexual imagery. It's even got internal rhyme. Really funny, right?

Sure. It's hilarious. One out of every four women will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime. A woman is raped every eighteen seconds in this country. Ever three minutes a woman is battered. In Vermont alone, the statistics tell us that one out of every three families experience sexual assault in their homes.

Many on this campus are still laughing. I asked one male student, the first person I saw wearing the shirt, how he felt about advocating rape in the name of the Middlebury Lacrosse team. He replied, "Lighten up. It's just a joke."

A woman I saw wearing it last year told me, "It's my boyfriend's. I didn't really take it seriously, I actually thought it was pretty funny." Perhaps the most interesting of the interactions I have had concerning the Lacrosse/Rape T-shirt occurred last Thursday, the night of the "Take Back The Night" march and rally (a community event protesting violence against women). standing in line at dinner, I noticed the man in front of me-saw those chilling words once again in bold black letters: "IT TAKES A

QUICK STICK TO BEAT A TIGHT CREASE." I tapped him on the shoulder, and told him I found his shirt incredibly offensive and violent, and asked him why he was wearing a shirt that advocated rape. He replied that he didn't see it that way. When I inquired as to how he did see it, he said, "I think it's witty. I think it's humorous."

I told him I knew plenty of women who have been raped, who would offer him a very different opinion. I asked him again, how could he think that wearing the shirt was funny?

How could he not see the implications of the political statement he was making, buying and wearing such a shirt?

"Look," he said, finally meeting my eyes

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for a second, and starting to get huffy, "You've picked the wrong subject to take up with me. It just so happens that I know people who have been affected by rape." Then how, I asked him, in light of having rape touch his life in a personal way, could he possibly think that rape was a laughing matter???

At this point, we had advanced in line, and were standing in front of the ID checker. Sensing the conversation near

ing its end, I invited him to participate in the march that night, to protest violence against women. He had to write a paper, he said. But he'd think about the t-shirt. A few minutes later, I was sitting down with my tray, when he came into the room with a friend, joking, "Jesus! Did you see that f—king old lady on the staircase...?" Upon

seeing me, he clammed up. I guess if you say something, if you take a stand against something you find violent and offensive, you must be an old lady. Someone young and attractive would find the shirt "funny," "witty," "humorous." Someone young and attractive wouldn't find the shirt offensive. Someone young and attractive would just "lighten up."

To lighten up is to shut up, and I'm not going to do either one. I realize it's not presently in vogue to stand up against the crowd, especially when you're talking about violence against women. You're called an angry feminist, a radical lesbian, or a "f—king old lady." Most times it's a lot easier to just lighten up. But think about it. I'm not talking about not knowing whether a female student on this campus prefers to be called a girl or a woman. I'm not talking about an individual's right to an opinion or free speech. I'm talking about rape. I'm talking about

wearing a t-shirt that links sports to violence against women. A t-shirt that offers inclusion to both sexes (“co-ed naked lacrosse”); but an inclusion that, for the woman, has a high price attached. A t-shirt that says rape is OK, it’s funny, it’s cool—you just have to be skilled enough to do it quick, before the woman you’re raping can say no. **IT TAKES A QUICK STICK TO BEAT A TIGHT CREASE.** I don’t think we can afford to laugh.

It’s been a long year, with a lot of discussion and controversy about sexism, equality, sexual harassment and the right to free speech. Everyone is tired; maybe it seems like the easiest thing to do is to lighten up, and just get through exams. I urge you to do otherwise. **RAPE IS NOT FUNNY.** I am surprised and outraged that representatives of the Middlebury Lacrosse teams think that it is, and are allowing their name to be associated with such an endorsement. If you’re wearing one of these shirts around, take it off, throw it away. If you know someone who wears one, demand to know why. Give that person the facts about rape and sexual violence. If you see the shirt around campus, if you’re hanging out and someone tells a “joke” about sexual violence. **SAY SOMETHING.** Refuse to let yourself be coerced into laughing and accepting it. Rape and jokes about rape are unacceptable. It is our responsibility

to make them unacceptable.

When a community can take matters of such vital importance so lightly, there is something quite wrong. It is more than disturbing. It is horrifying. As long as rape is a funny joke on this campus, as long as people are afraid not to laugh. Middlebury College will never be the safe, supportive, intellectual environment it claims to be. STOP LAUGHING AND SAY SOMETHING. DO SOMETHING.