

A reflection on The List of Men To Avoid and anti-sexual assault activism (reposted)

Posted on

April 10, 2018 by stairssite

On December 12th, Elizabeth Dunn posted names of perpetrators of sexual assault and abuse on Facebook. After the posting, Administration and some named students pushed for disciplinary action against Liz. They also asked them to release the names of survivors. After weeks of uncertainty, this past Friday, Liz was issued a letter of official sanction for violation of the Respect for Persons policy, a document that remains on their permanent record. In this flurry to punish Liz, most people forgot about the real problem of sexual assault on this campus, worrying about the “defamation” of the listed men rather than validating the pain and suffering of the survivors involved in the post.

Witnessing all of this fuckery as both Liz’s friend and a sexual assault activist on campus, I feel immense frustration. The question I keep coming back to in the aftermath of this backlash against Liz and the involved survivors is why the hell does it have to be them doing the labor, putting themselves on the line? Why should it be survivors who have to protect a community that hasn’t protected them? Globally, nationally, and on this campus, survivors are consistently tasked with shifting rape culture and promoting safety and respect within their communities.

While Liz and other survivors get punished for speaking out, many perpetrators of sexual assault suffer zero consequences. Survivors must face the reality of their experiences and their trauma every day, but perpetrators and those who have not experienced assault have the privilege to look the other way. It’s an attitude that leads to those most affected and harmed having to do the triggering work that should never fall on them. When nobody else is stepping up, survivors are forced to stand up alone to break the cycle of violence.

Putting themselves and their experiences out for the world to see, activist survivors run the risk of being invalidated, punished, shamed, and retraumatized both personally and in their work. In this specific case, people continuously call the legitimacy of the survivors’ claims into question, standing by and supporting the named men through punishing Liz. In spite of all of this, survivors continue to speak up and take action. We survivors are given no choice. If we don’t do it, then who will?

As I look back on the work that Liz Dunn and other fellow sexual assault activists have done on this campus, I feel both grateful and angry. I am grateful for their guts and strength in doing the work and for the support they have given me. I am angry that they have to carry such a large burden that others refuse to help shoulder. I’m angry that the silence and stagnancy of the larger community make this burden increasingly heavy and render survivor’s labor invisible and unappreciated.

So here are the things that I want...Not all men are abusers and not all abusers are men, but rape culture thrives in hyper-masculine circles. For men who aren't abusers, you've got to step up. Call out other men, call out your friends. This goes for past abusers too. Show the hell up. I don't want an abuser to lead sexual assault activist initiatives, but I do want them to do the personal work that makes it a little easier for the rest of us to end violence on campus. For people of other genders, you too have to hold yourselves and others accountable. Don't look to survivors to do the work of educating you. It is your responsibility to learn how you perpetuate rape culture and participate in it. I want those who have gone by unscathed by sexual and intimate partner violence to invest in the safety of their community members by doing something tangible, not just talking about it or consuming stories of violence as if it's juicy gossip.

This is real. This is serious. Survivors are tired. So, rather than pointing a finger at Liz or the myriad of survivors trying to make a difference, maybe take a good hard look at yourself and start giving a fuck.