

Rural Perspectives on Sexual Violence

In this article I hope to share some information on the rural cultural “values” regarding sexual violence. I do not do so as an “expert,” by any stretch of the imagination, but as an observer and an individual that bears witness to and deals with these attitudes regularly.

In my time with the Mt. Graham Safe House I’ve listened to many opinions, disarmed several scoffers, endured a few misinformed radicals and observed body language as people disengage entirely from a possible “run-in” with the guy from the Safe House. Thus far, my conclusion is probably the same that most would reach: rural communities do not and will not accept sexual violence as a viable issue because doing so would shatter community reputation and require personal, professional and community accountability for such an issue.

Community Reputation – As long as we keep our perfect community façades, we will continue to victimize those that suffer with/through sexual violence. In speaking with community as well as school officials, I’ve heard many times about what they do or do not want to address. Sexual assault is *not* something that they choose to address. Thus far, the attitude is that issues such as sexual assault don’t affect us because we live in such a “peaceful, small, religious community.” Recently, two sexual abuse incidents occurred at our local junior college. I spoke with a college official that was kind enough to point out that both were classified as misconduct. Basically, the college was unable to accept a couple of “bad” marks on the campus crime report that they publish regularly. Evidently, if we just hide the problem, it isn’t there at all.

Personal Accountability – Nobody wants to spend their valuable time working on issues that don’t affect them. Because these types of problems “do not exist” locally, no one needs to upset their life by fighting against the violence. It took a local school shooting in the 90’s to get local parents involved in young people’s lives; I won’t venture a guess at what will be required to open people’s eyes to the unreported as well as reported sexual violence that occurs in our rural community.

Professional Accountability – Rural employers are at a disadvantage when it comes to the services they can offer to employees. An employee in a rural community at a locally owned and operated business or organization is fortunate to receive health benefits. Above those benefits, not much else exists. Larger employers, such as Phelps Dodge, a multi-national copper mining company with a mine in Morenci, Arizona, offer services such as counseling and employee assistance. Recently, I spoke with a counselor that works for an employee assistance program in Morenci, Arizona. She informed me that one of the key contributors to relationship violence, in cases she deals with, is work-related stress. Everyone has work related stress, but those that are without resources may never have the opportunity to learn how to deal with that stress constructively. Smaller companies with smaller budgets most often cannot afford to offer their employees the services that they may need most. Consequently, the rural employer's response, very often, is that these issues are "family things" or "legal issues" and should be kept within the family or dealt with by law enforcement.

Community Accountability – Like any other social issue, sexual violence, when left alone, does not phase out or diminish. Rural communities need to grasp the concept that relationship violence will not take care of itself; therefore, it requires that the community take action. Unfortunately, these misconceptions are also a modus operandi for rural law enforcement agencies. However, I must give kudos to our local law enforcement agencies. They are dedicated to applying the law, not giving advice or turning their backs on victims.

The idea that larger cities are "progressive" compared to rural communities isn't far off the mark. Smaller communities do typically enjoy less crime as well as solitude from the hustle and bustle but they pay the price for these benefits in ignorance and stubbornness. Overall, the social values that rural communities hold on to need to be critically reconsidered, especially if we want to see an end to issues such as sexual violence that plague our society and cities, large and small.