

Katie Koestner talks cultural shifts in sexual violence advocacy

by Kendall Graham

In 2010, the Jacksonville Jaguars Foundation introduced a media campaign called “Straight Talk,” aimed at reducing teen pregnancy, the spread of STDs among teens and promoting safe-sex education around the city. It included a program that brought in speakers and activists to educate local students. For three weeks each year over three consecutive years, the foundation funded activist Katie Koestner to speak at Jacksonville’s 23 public high schools to help with the advocacy.

“The most important part is building strong young men and women to have confidence in their own personhood and have a sense of respect,” Koestner said.

Koestner appeared on the cover of TIME magazine in 1991, at age 18, as the first person to speak out publicly and nationally about date rape. She was a freshman at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va.

At the time, the term was used to distinguish a type of sexual assault, where the victim knew their assailant in a casual capacity, from what was referred to as stranger rape, where the victim did not know their assailant.

Her outcry helped to destigmatize survivors of the act and educate the public on a concept with a lot of gray area.

Whether it’s a city like Jacksonville, Fla., in which almost 15 percent of the population lives in poverty, or a more affluent resort community like Nantucket, or even a historic college in Virginia, these issues can, and do, happen to some degree everywhere.

In Koestner’s eyes, if these behavioral changes could be addressed as early as possible, at the root, it could help achieve change at a wider societal and cultural level.

“Maybe if I had someone talk to me in high school about these things, I wouldn’t have had this happen,” Koestner said of her own sexual assault in 1990 while she was studying chemical engineering and Japanese.

But this language shifts the onus onto the victim. Why is rape and sexual assault discussed as something that happens to the victim and not as something that the perpetrator does?

“If you say no, you should be able to believe you’ll be respected in that decision,” Koestner said.

“And when someone doesn’t respect that answer, you should feel comfortable enough to speak up for yourself.”

Shortly after her assault, she submitted a letter to the editor at her college’s student newspaper, *The Flat Hat*, in which she called out the school’s response to her case. She submitted the letter under her own name, not fearing the scrutiny or backlash she would receive for speaking out, which included victim blaming, accusations of lying and having financial support from her parents revoked.

Koestner's assailant denied her version of events and, though he was found guilty when the case was heard at the college (of emotional coercion, meaning he emotionally pressured her into sex rather than using physical force, which Koestner maintains was the case) he was allowed to continue his studies.

Koestner has spoken at over 5000 schools and universities globally, beginning when she was still in college, because she wanted to tackle the root of the issue, making behavioral changes as early as possible. At the time in many of these schools, the presentation was the first of its kind.

Koestner has made it her focus to educate people on the ways in which individuals can create change in their own communities. She was the keynote speaker at local nonprofit A Safe Place's annual summer fundraiser July 11.

A Safe Place brought Koestner to the island because of her story and to raise awareness of and funds for the free and confidential services they provide, among which are a rape crisis program and a trauma therapy program.

It also has programming year-round in all Nantucket schools covering bullying, harassment and boundaries, and hopes to introduce an annual public speaker program to the high school.

"The biggest thing I want people to walk away with is connection," said Rachel Larson Devine, A Safe Place's director of development.

A Safe Place's fundamental mission is to make connections with people, make survivors feel comfortable enough to come forward and ensure that they aren't alone in their struggles.

"We hear these words, 'sexual assault,' 'domestic violence,' and get a little desensitized to them," Devine said.

"We really don't break down the connection in people's stories. I think these stories are very powerful, and when you're hearing them, you're leaving with something that affects you and helps create change."

What's most important to Koestner is being face-to-face and able to connect with a room full of people who are engaged in the conversation.

"It's a dying art," she said of live presentations. "You can't connect synapses or stretch empathy through TikToks. I adore the privilege of the podium. I'd rather do that than be on more television shows."

In the TIME article where Koestner was featured, a national poll was conducted with questions like "If a man pays for dinner, should he expect sex?" More than half said yes.

"I don't think half the country would say yes to that anymore," Koestner said, acknowledging that attitudes on these kinds of issues have since changed, due at least in part to the education and advocacy work done by her organization and countless others like hers.

She has ambivalent feelings on the use of media in helping advocacy around sexual violence, harassment and gender-based discrimination. When asked if she thought the #MeToo movement has helped or hindered in this regard, she paused to consider before saying that it felt both elusive and exclusive.

“It feels a little like the pretty people got a voice,” Koestner said. “I feel like it wasn’t as inclusive as it could have been in encouraging everyday people to come forward.”

Koestner has, however, previously acknowledged her privilege in being able to come forward with her experience with relatively mild pushback.

“Had I not been white, had I not been a straight-A student... not had the resume I did, or the demographic qualities, Christian, virgin, you know... I don’t think my case would have hit any headline ever,” she told *The Flat Hat* in 2017.

The #MeToo movement started in 2006 with activist Tarana Burke, a Black woman who wanted to empower and stand in solidarity with other women who had also experienced sexual violence. It gained traction in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag on social media, encouraging other survivors to speak out about their own experiences. This had a wildfire effect of mostly women and some men, famous and non-famous, sharing their stories in an effort of solidarity.

Koestner hasn’t seen the movement changing laws or policies, but did notice, through her presentation circuit at schools and universities, that it created an environment of parents being concerned that their sons would get falsely accused of sexual violence or harassment.

She doesn’t believe the movement is as effective as getting into these schools and organizations and trying to change and rewrite policies. Actually meeting face to face with these communities has more of an effect than a hashtag that she feels is more about looking for someone or something to blame.

Koestner became self-reliant following her assault and national outcry because she lost a lot of personal, professional and financial support.

“When you have your own (sense of) control, you don’t have to live in fear, ever,” she said.

This is something that she finds the women she has counseled struggle with. They’re in situations where they are not in control because they are being abused or assaulted or having their autonomy taken away somehow.

“Empowering every human to be able to be as free as possible is incredibly important,” she said.