

Notes from June 27, 2018

Consent, Young People, and Jackson Hole

Welcome and greeting by Brian Nystrom

Thanking the partners who are co-hosting the event, Raising Girls (a program of GAP!), The Community Safety Network, Planet Jackson Hole, St. John's Episcopal Church, and the Teton County Library. Sarah graduated from Jackson Hole High School in 2011. She graduated from Colorado College in political science, has been speaking with Jeff Bucholtz during his visits to Jackson, and giving presentations to the Jackson Hole High School's Gender class with Mr. Jenkins.

Sarah Ross

Tonight's goal is to better our relationships throughout our community, and step away from fear. It's about uncovering the dynamics that impact not only our young people, but our own relationships, faith groups, work places, and family structures.

It's about redefining normal.

So what is normal?

In my experience, girls were sexualized at a younger age than boys. It was one way to prove social worth. They felt they were valued based on appearances and sexual willingness. They felt trapped.

"The culture was very predatory toward younger girls," Madison said. "Nonconsensual things were happening, but I was so inexperienced with guys, they walked all over me. I had to act like everything was normal and not make a scene. There was no regard for consent. There was no regard for you as a person. If you weren't down to perform 'X' sexual task, then what are you doing? ... If you didn't have that social capital as a sexual object then you were irrelevant."

The expectation that she do whatever a guy wants made Lauren feel dehumanized, silenced. Her worth was measured in giving "great head," she said. Her voice did not matter. Her worth as a person was not valued.

"You get stuck in a situation where [hooking up] wasn't the only way out, but they made you feel like it was the easy way. The way you wouldn't be an outsider," Lauren said. "I remember thinking, 'I can't make a scene, they're going to side with the guy.'"

Male enjoyment was emphasized, female enjoyment was not considered

"It was like some sort of ambiguous currency," she said. "Like, 'Oh if I make you go down on me that's not rape.'"

The men seemed to think they were doing the girls a favor: "It was some form of convoluted chivalry, like 'I won't force you to have sex, but if you don't do that why are you here?'"

Hookups followed a template that Sollitt felt obligated to follow. "I wasn't even targeting my sexual experiences as something that was supposed to be a celebration of a pleasurable thing," Sollitt said. "It was more like this is step A and this is step B and this is step C.

"When we talked about it, we would ask 'how far did you go?' not 'how good did it feel?'" she said.

Both girls and boys were pressured, though girls were shamed more often both by boys and girls.

“It was not just guys who pressured her. Girls wanted to fit in with the guys so they would pressure other girls to do stuff and then turn on them and berate them for it”, Lauren said. That was one way girls could signal to guys that they were cool.

The pressure to be manly, to be “cool” was intense. The “cool” guys were the ones “who had the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do.” Noah was a “late bloomer,” he lacked that power.

“I convinced myself they were very casual. Not all of them were necessarily positive, but they were normal.”

On the bus to baseball tournaments and in the locker room, his teammates talked about girls, what they would do and what they would not do, showed each other pictures of nude classmates. “It happened all the time,” Noah said.

There was a culture of silence, secrecy, and shame

The majority of interviewees did not remember hearing about consent, and did not talk about consent with their partners.

Interviewees did not talk to anyone when something happened that made them uncomfortable.

They felt resigned, didn’t think anything would change.

This is still the case.

“It’s going to be this way. You just have to get used to it.”

Jackson’s risk-taking and small town culture often contributed to the difficulties interviewees faced.

“Risk is the number one thing we love. It’s like, ‘Wait, so you haven’t done this?’ ‘You haven’t dropped Corbet’s?’ ‘You haven’t done this drug?’ ‘You haven’t sucked his dick?’”

It was difficult to stand her ground with classmates “because you have so much time left together,” she said. “I compromised so much not to offend. I felt like if I call someone out, I have to see him for the rest of my life.”

As with many aspects of Jackson’s culture, the drinking norms are extreme. And this starts young. Teton County adolescents are drinking, by some measures, at some of the highest rates in the state.

“There’s this perfectionist piece, for example, being expected to be great at everything, being the best athlete, being smart, being pretty. You see parents struggling with that, and their kids too.”

Drinking was a prerequisite for hookups. One never happened without the other.

Some Takeaways

- Young people who are able to have open conversations about sex with a close adult are more likely to make positive choices.
- When young women know more about themselves and expect to enjoy their sexual relationships, evidence shows they are more discerning about their sexual behavior.
- Comprehensive sex education leads to lower rates of teen pregnancy, STDs, and rape. Both genders report more positive sexual experiences.
- Teens are less likely, not more likely, to have sex later when they talk about it with trusted adults.

Closing Goal

It’s time to close the gap between experiences.

It’s time to step away from fear, and to engage in these conversations with as much courage and calm as possible.

This has to happen not only within families, it has to be a cultural shift.

Sarah presented questions for groups to consider discussing and gave them 20 minutes to chat.

1. What motivated you to attend this event? How does talking about this make you feel? What information has been the most difficult or uncomfortable for you, and why?
2. How do you see the normalization of the themes presented in the article in Jackson? How have you participated in this culture, and how have you seen them be beneficial and/or hurtful? Do you think it is possible to shift these norms? How?

For example, risk-taking culture, extreme drinking, sexual pressure, over-sexualization of young women?

3. What is your vision for young people here? How do we close the gap between what girls and boys are experiencing? What role do you have in making change, and what would you like to see in your family/faith community/school/workplace/local government?

Jimmy Bartz

Closing of the discussion circle and audience takes turns sharing.

Here are photos of the notes taken by Sarah from the audience discussion section of the night:

Jimmy Bartz thanks attendants and partnerships!