

BY
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UNDER the

CONCRETE

sculpture by John Waddell
photo by Sarah Gianelli

RAISING THE BAR: HOW SOME
DOWNTOWN FLAGSTAFF BAR
OWNERS ARE COMBATING
SEXUAL ASSAULT.

While students understand the events that mark Tequila Sunrise as the most widespread college drinking weekend of the year, where participating bars open their doors at 6AM, to coincide with Homecoming events at Northern Arizona University, less realized is that this weekend is also commonly characterized by an increase in sexual assaults.

This year was different because the spike never quite subsided. People, mostly women, were being drugged and sexually assaulted throughout the month of November. Stories about what **Myra Ferrell-Womochil**, director of community education at Northland Family Help Center, refers to as "non-alcohol drug facilitated sexual assaults" continue to be circulated across town.

"We are basing the increase in non-alcohol drug facilitated sexual assaults purely from word of mouth and informal disclosures ... Women are simply coming forward and telling us or telling someone who is close to them, who then shares with us, that they have been drugged while being at a bar."

Flagstaff DJ **Emmett White**, who spins regularly in many bars downtown, comments on how widespread sexual assault is. "A majority of the people I know in this town, including myself, have been drugged and/or targeted for sexual assault, and that's not confined to the bar scene. It happens at house parties, it happens on campus, it happens at restaurants."

While Mr. White regards the recent increase in sexual assaults stemming from downtown bars as cause for concern, he believes it is also a good opportunity to engage bar owners and bar staff, as well as patrons, in these issues.

Northland Family Help Center, Northern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault and the Flagstaff Police Department have been working together for the last three years to assist the bars in making sure they have the tools they need to meaningfully address a few realities.

- 1) Alcohol is the most commonly used substance to facilitate date rapes and sexual assault.
- 2) Sexual assaults can and often do happen at any bar in town, all year round.
- 3) As bystanders to the potential for violence, bar staff who have been trained in prevention strategies can play a critical role.

This past Tequila Sunrise marked the third year in a row where NFHC offered sexual assault prevention training to local bar staff, and through their partnership with NACASA and the Flagstaff Police Department, also delivered posters to bars for the event with sober messages about watching your drink, looking out for your friends, and the popular "in your hands, you hold the power to stop rape," which is intended to be placed above urinals in the men's bathroom.

The Green Room was the only bar in town that had these posters hung up in the bar on the morning of Tequila Sunrise. Community educators for NFHC, Ms. Ferrell-Womochil and the author of this article surveyed patrons on their reactions to the posters. We wanted to get a sense for how these messages were being received.

Despite one very intoxicated guy who was upset by the messages, slurring, "I don't come to bars to have to hear about this kind of sh*t, I come to get my rape on," most people appreciated the messages. Women shared stories of being drugged, harassed, and assaulted. Many men were appalled it happened at all. "If people feel the need to hang these posters" said one guy, "it is clear there is a problem, and that is really sad."

When owner **Rand Jenkins** heard word his bar was being victimized, his response was "Shock and dismay, the typical 'I never thought this could happen to me' response. Then anger and frustration with the world, followed quickly by problem solving and crime fighting."

Ms. Ferrell-Womochil praised the bar for what it already does and his commitment to have his staff trained by NFHC's community education staff. "Rand is really trying hard to create a climate within his bar that is not conducive to sexual assault. He is re-educating his staff."

Says Mr. White: "There seems to be a sort of silent inaction on the part of most bar staff and owners when it comes to this, I think because they are afraid that addressing it will affect their business, and also because it requires a sea change in the mentality of people that work in the bar."

At 1PM on February 28, The Green Room is hosting the first of three sexual violence education and prevention trainings given by community educators from NFHC. The trainings are specifically geared toward bar staff to meaningfully and appropriately combat sexual

assault, highlights the important role bars can play in creating a safe space for their patrons, and are open to the public.

"I think that this education will hopefully start some conversations, raise awareness, and dramatically reduce the chance of this happening," says Mr. Jenkins. "One of the biggest reasons why I decided to go into business for myself was the belief that I could help the community."


As a DJ, Mr. White understands the role he plays in setting the mood, and recognizes the responsibility he has as a bystander with a microphone. "Some guys in particular think it's cool to stand in groups at the edge of the dance floor and ogle the girls as if it's a show or something, or to continue to pursue a dance or conversation after someone has said 'no.' All of these things contribute to an atmosphere I don't have to be a part of, so ... I'll change the music, play something you can vogue to, that can do the trick."

"If the creep factor in the room gets too high, you can feel it, something shifts in the air. I've been known to stop the music and point 'em out, and remind people that they don't have to be sleazed upon, that if someone is being creepy or predatory, to let me or the bouncers know, and we'll get them out of the bar, no questions asked."

It is important that men become active bystanders to the potential of sexual assault. Says Mr. White: "I've witnessed people trying to take advantage of the most clearly wasted woman in the bar. In this situation I'll intervene and ask the woman if she wants this person around and if her friends are nearby, or if I can get her a cab."

"In cases where the person is too drunk or maybe even drugged to be coherent, I'll try to get the perpetrator 86'ed or at the very least make sure the bouncers know not to let them leave together. These situations are tough because sometimes they are too out of it to even remember their address. For this reason and more, I hope people adopt and stick with the buddy system."

Mr. White continues: "Men, join The MARS Project (men against rape and sexism) on campus. Talk to other men about consent. Don't be afraid to take things seriously and stand up for what's right. Know that these problems are not going to disappear anytime soon, but if we don't continue to talk and implement effective and creative ways of dealing with them, they will stay the same or get worse. To affect

cultural change takes decades, and knowing what is right, educating yourself and others, and sticking to your guns can make it happen." 

THE FACTS:

- Someone cannot legally give consent if that person is intoxicated. Legal consent can only be given if it is: Verbal, Sober, and enthusiastic.
- If someone is intoxicated and "accidentally" rapes someone, that person is still accountable for the rape. It is not an excuse.
- Most drug-facilitated rapes involve alcohol, despite what is happening in the bars now.
- Most sexual assault victims personally know the perpetrator; most sexual assaults do not involve strangers.
- It is never a victim's fault for being raped.
- Friends don't let friends sexually assault someone. There is an important place for the bystander.

RESOURCES:

Northland Family Help Center
(24-hour crisis hotline):
928-527-1900 or 877-634-2723

Northern Arizona Center
Against Sexual Assault
(NACASA): 928/213-6112

Flagstaff Police Department:
928/774-1414

NAU campus Police:
928/823-3611

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