

accent



Laugh or death

Bill Dunn wonders what his new neighbors will be like. **2D**

Community

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“We need to change the way we react and treat people coming forward. We need to stop victim-blaming,”

— SUE BLASASAVAGE, OF OXFORD



STEVEN VALENTI REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Members of the Survivors Speak group, from left, Mary Taylor of Derby, Sue Blasasavage of Oxford, Debbie Mitchell of Woodbury and Patti Ieraci of Meriden at Jane Doe No More in Naugatuck.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Jane Doe No More empowers survivors of sexual assault

BY KELLIE LAMBERT
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

In the past year, the silence was broken. Headlines exploded with revelations, day after day, a never-ending string of women sharing stories of sexual assault and abuse. Voices spoke up publicly and loudly, day after day, on social media under the hashtag #MeToo.

The impact swelled at the end of 2017, with “The Silence Breakers” named as Time Magazine’s Person of the Year. Hollywood’s red carpet turned black at the Golden Globes award ceremony as a statement supporting women.

In the news, countless political and entertainment figures have been accused of sexual assault, some losing their jobs and reputations. Dozens and dozens of young women, including Olympic athletes, spoke out in a Michigan courtroom about being sexually abused by Dr. Larry Nassar, ultimately sending him to prison for the rest of his life.

Since last year, the stories of sexual assault and abuse do not stop, and for local victims, the revelations bring validation to their own stories of healing.

TO KNOW MORE To find out more about Jane Doe No More or to inquire about the Survivors Speak program, call 203-729-9245 or visit janedoenomore.org

“It’s not a trend,” said Sue Blasasavage of Oxford, a victim of child sexual assault, of the constant flow of stories. Blasasavage, who was abused by a neighbor from the ages of 9 to 11 years, said the recent media attention is a positive way to help educate the public on the intricacies of sexual assault trauma. She said the road to recovery is a long one, but the first step is stopping the

silence.

“It altered who I was as a person. I had so much shame. It was beyond comprehension, I felt so alone, so confused,” said Blasasavage, who now gives public speeches about her experience. “I didn’t tell my mom for three years.”

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SURVIVORS: #MeToo brings awareness

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SILENT SUFFERING is not uncommon among victims of sexual assault — whether as a child, as a youth who may not understand that certain actions are inappropriate and wrong, or as a teen or adult when one might question why this is happening to them, and feel shame or fear.

Although the current media climate is reporting numerous stories of rape, assault and abuse, countless stories remain untold. According to RAINN — the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network — every 98 seconds an American is sexually assaulted. Every eight minutes, that victim is a child, like Blasasavage, or like a few other local women who recently gathered at the offices of Jane Doe No More in Naugatuck on a winter morning.

The women are graduates of Jane Doe No More’s “Survivors Speak” program, which encourages victims to share their stories. The special two-day workshop helps participants explore, document, and share their stories in a supportive environment.

Graduates become part of the Survivors Speak Outreach Team, who travel to college campuses, community events, law enforcement training sessions and a wide variety of other events to share their stories of survival. The result is increased awareness of sexual assault while providing advocacy, training and provide support for those affected.

“It’s helped me tremendously, it’s been very healing to tell my story. It’s very validating. I felt there was no one like me,” said Debbie Mitchell of Woodbury,

adding that Survivor Speaks helped her to connect with other survivors. Mitchell, a survivor of child sexual assault, was abused from age 6 to 19 by a trusted family member. “I didn’t realize anything was wrong or inappropriate until I was 10 or 11 years old. Then I felt shame and kept it a secret.”

Mitchell went about her life after abuse, getting married and raising children, but in her 40s, the effects of the abuse surfaced in the form of stress, nightmares and other triggering events producing emotional and physical reactions.

“I had never told my story before,” Mitchell said. “I finally sought help. And things have gotten better.”

Patti Ieraci of Meriden also kept her reality a secret for many years. Ieraci was a victim of childhood sexual assault from ages 8 to 10 by her father’s best friend, and is also an adult rape victim.

“I never even reported it as an adult because I didn’t want to be retraumatized,” Ieraci said. “I could not go through it again.”

WHEN VICTIMS FEEL

SHAME and are afraid to speak out, many perpetrators of sexual assault will never face punishment. By the time victims are strong enough to come forward and face the intense questioning of their past experiences, evidence has disappeared or is lacking, and often the statute of limitations to enforce the law has run out. According to RAINN, only 310 of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police and only six out of every 1,000 perpetrators will end up in prison.

One reason so few are willing to go after their offenders

immediately is that they do not want to remember the trauma they felt during and after the crime, the women all agreed. When Blasasavage finally came forward, she found it difficult to relive the reality of what had happened to her.

“When I did, I felt like I was revictimized by the police, with the questioning. ... It was more than I could handle and I was suicidal,” Blasasavage said. “I refused to testify because I was so fragile. I still seek counseling and I did a lot of work in my teens and 20s.”

Now Blasasavage is determined to try to stop the cycle of sexual abuse and assault. She said it’s important to intervene in situations where one suspects something is not right, such as practicing “bystander intervention.” She also said that an important action when someone comes forward is “to believe victims and support them,” because speaking up is difficult. Also, look for clues among loved ones, she said; if something doesn’t seem right, it’s worth investigating.

“Don’t ignore the red flags,” she said. “If a child

doesn’t want to go to someone’s house, ask them why.”

“It could be the nicest person you know, it doesn’t look like the homeless man, Blasasavage said. “These (abusers) are professional con artists and it could be someone you trust.”

THE PUBLIC DOUBTS of whether someone’s story is true can be emotionally damaging, Blasasavage said, and she understands how difficult it is to come forward. Rape-VictimAdvocates.org states that only 2 to 8 percent of rapes are falsely reported,

the same percentage as other felonies.

“We have tremendous compassion that these people have suffered in silence. We need to change the way we react and treat people coming forward. We need to stop victim-blaming,” Blasasavage said, adding that the more people who speak out, the better. “We give a voice to someone who doesn’t have a voice.”

The other women agreed, adding that it is not only women who are affected; men are victims of sexual assault as well. Victims come from all walks of life, famous and non-famous, rich and poor, young and old. Every story told can help heal someone or save someone from trauma, as the public gains knowledge and, hopefully, compassion.

“We have a platform to use as a message of hope,” Ieraci said. “The more you talk about it, it’s very empowering. It’s when you find support.”

Mary Taylor of Derby is grateful she found support through Jane Doe No More and Survivors Speak. Taylor was a victim of sexual child

abuse from her grandfather from the ages of 5 to 14. After years of denial and shame, Taylor finally sought counseling and support as an adult. She calls Jane Doe No More and Survivors Speak “the best family that anyone can ask for,” she said. “They know exactly what to say or do.”

Mitchell agreed, saying that being together with others with similar stories, and sharing those stories to help others find courage to speak out and speak up, is healing and hopeful.

“There is strength in numbers,” Mitchell added.