

3 years after rape at Vanderbilt, progress but work to be done

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In the three years since authorities say four football players raped an unconscious woman in a dorm room at Vanderbilt University, there have been three trials and only two convictions.

The rape occurred three years ago Thursday. The case became a pivotal part of the growing national dialogue on sexual assault, shedding light on a crime that has been historically underreported.

Victims advocates cheered as it brought added support for victims and prompted change at Vanderbilt, though student leaders say there is still work to be done.

"We don't want this to take a break and we don't want to lose the momentum," said rising junior Sara Starr, a student working with administrators and peers on the issue. "No one has it right, and there's going to be a lot more work to do even for universities that are doing their best."

Advocates said the case was a catalyst for victims to come forward, to share their stories. They attributed a statistical increase in crimes not to increased frequency, but to more people speaking up. They said the case shows the resources and time authorities are willing to put in seeking justice for victims.

But some fear it also sends a second message. One of waiting and facing your rapist in court, again and again and again.

"And we're not done, and it's three years later," said Sharon Travis, prevention and community outreach specialist at the Nashville Sexual Assault Center. "No wonder survivors don't want to come forward."

Campus police investigating vandalism inside Gillette Hall dorm noticed something suspicious that occurred in the early morning hours of June 23, 2013: four football players going into a room carrying an unconscious woman with them. That led to a police investigation, the discovery of photographs and videos of sexual assault and the indictments of the four football players.

It is a prominent national example of sexual assaults on campus. The problem is widespread.

Federal education officials have launched hundreds of investigations into colleges across the country that have been accused of mishandling reports of sexual assault. Investigations at Vanderbilt and two other Tennessee campuses are ongoing; a federal lawsuit filed in February includes allegations that student culture at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville enabled sexual assaults by student-athletes.

The six-month jail sentence handed down earlier this month for Stanford University swimmer Brock Turner was criticized as too lenient. Baylor University in Texas faces allegations in lawsuits it did not investigate reports of sexual assault. An external review led to the removal of the university president and sacking of football coach Art Briles.

Nashville Deputy District Attorney General Tom Thurman, who postponed his retirement nearly three years to keep working on the Vanderbilt case, said publicity of high-profile cases spurred necessary discussion.

"It's obviously been brought to the forefront and people are being forced to address it," he said.

As more cases make national media headlines, more victims at Vanderbilt and other Tennessee schools have stepped forward to report sexual assaults. Campus rape reporting has climbed steadily in recent years, according to data from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. A report released in March showed campus rape reports jumped by nearly 10 percent, from 51 to 56 statewide, even as overall crime fell by 7 percent.

At Vanderbilt, the high-profile rape case has given context and specificity to a problem that once lingered in the shadows.

The first trial took place in the heart of the spring semester in 2015. The second trial captured attention again last semester. The third just ended.