

Sexist attitudes still afflict us, but we are evolving



David Plazas, dplazas@tennessean.com 11:26 p.m. CST January 30, 2015

Vanderbilt rape trial, PBS special highlight abuses toward women



(Photo: *The Tennessean*)

The day before a jury found two former Vanderbilt University football players guilty of defiling, humiliating and assaulting an unconscious woman in a 2013 gang rape, PBS aired "A Path Appears," a documentary series focusing on the struggles of women in the U.S. and abroad.

The Jan. 26 premiere featured Nashville, specifically Magdalene, a residential community for women who have been prostituted, addicted to drugs or trafficked at an early age, sometimes by relatives.

They are recovering their lives and dignity through community and work, and many are employed by Thistle Farms on Charlotte Pike, known for its natural body care line and the Thistle Stop Café. Founder and Executive Director Rev. Becca Stevens and actress and activist Ashley Judd were prominently featured.

Throughout the week, I've been troubled with a particular, perhaps simplistic, question surrounding the pain felt by the victim in the football players' case and the Magdalene women: How could these men hate these women so much?

How could a grandfather sell a granddaughter into prostitution?

How could a church elder molest a girl in his congregation?

How could four college students perpetrate a vicious rape that involved video recording the victim, sexually assaulting her with a bottle and urinating on her, all while she was passed out?

Sexism still exists

"Hate" might be extreme, and perhaps the better word is "disrespect," but it reveals that in our so-called post-modern world, sexism and misogyny still exist.

Nashville psychotherapist Barbara Sanders compared lingering sexism to lingering racism, which is far more subtle than in the past, but still present in the way we view each other.

"I think that like racism, we'd like to think we're in a post-sexism era, and we're not," Sanders told me.

Men who commit violence toward women likely were abused themselves or witnessed abuse. "They have also grown up in or been victimized by some sort of situation where they were helpless," she added.

Traditional child rearing often involved giving different messages to boys and girls about their bodies and their responsibility to themselves and others.

"Rather than teaching boys to respect women, we teach them not to get her pregnant," said Tim Tohill, president of the Sexual Assault Center for 21 years.

"Society, in general, tends to look at sexual assault as if it's the woman's responsibility to protect herself and she put herself in a situation," Tohill added.

Rape is not about sex, but about anger, power and control. "I'd like to think the majority of people wouldn't do it," he said.

Reclaiming their truth

Attitudes are evolving, if slowly, in another important way.

It's more prevalent to view victims of sexual assault as victims and not as people deserving of their assault.

"Already the conversation is changing to one of compassion," said Stevens, who added that "A Path Appears" strengthened orders to 200 more a day and gained Thistle Farms a greater social media following.

In addition, victims are losing their fear that kept them silent and ashamed.

"The woman has a strong voice: 'Maybe I can speak my truth,'" Stevens said.

Despite that the former football players' victim had not been aware that she was raped and was bullied into staying silent, she eventually gained the courage to speak up.

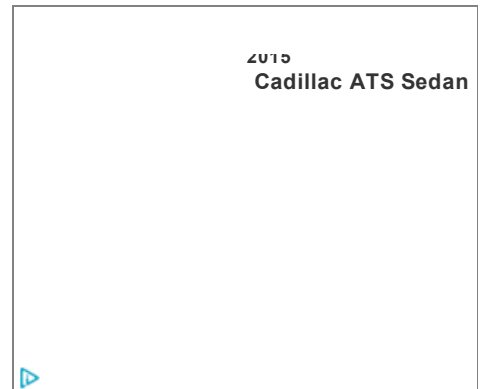
The verdict was a vindication of her truth after spending nearly three weeks hearing graphic and disturbing testimony.

In her post-verdict statement, she said, "[I want to remind other victims of sexual violence: You are not alone. You are not to blame.](/story/news/2015/01/27/vanderbilt-rape-survivor-statement/22434833/)"

May this evolution of our attitudes toward sexual assault continue and may we face our own fears and prejudices to strive to become a healthier, most compassionate society.

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