

Women have right to consent; local leaders need to respect that

AT ISSUE: SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

BY EDWARD CARLSON

Allegations against a local elected official have again forced issues surrounding sexual misconduct to become center stage in our community.

As the case that has been in the headlines proceeds – and regardless of the outcome of the investigation – it will be important to keep the voices of survivors of sexual abuse top of mind.

I have always believed that, in our community, survivors are worthy of our support. I first got involved in this mission 30 years ago and have served on the board of the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) since the late 1990s.

Overall, as a society, we tend to believe women more now than we did 30 years ago.

Yet, still too often, we default to unfair stereotypes. We still can hear that some thinking about women has not changed.

We hear that women who report assaults or domestic violence were “asking for it” or even that they “enjoyed it.” While we must listen to women who step forward, we must also remember that abuse is not about sex. It is always about control.

Now, a common community understanding about consent is especially important.

Putting any legal definitions aside, leaders here must agree that women have rights, no matter what they may be wearing in a social situation and no matter what their conversation with men they meet or know may entail.

Anyone who wants to be considered a true leader in this community should show respect for women without clinging to the thinking or language of the past.

There would be no education on these matters for anyone in the community that could match talking to the professionals at the Women’s Resource Center, who hear dozens of stories every year from women who survive abuse and sexual misconduct.

The survivors who choose to share their stories with WRC Advocates confidentially or within the larger community demonstrate

incredible courage. I applaud them to no end.

After all of these years of serving as a board member at the WRC, I am unaware of any cases where a woman recanted because their story was not true.

National research shows that as many as 98 percent of reported cases of sexual assault are validated through the legal system.

What is far more likely is that women choose not to report because they feel like they will lose the power struggle.

Believing survivors and understanding consent are the right ways for leaders in our community to balance power for the good of everyone.

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