Phillips Exeter Academy
Exeter, New Hampshire

The Exonian

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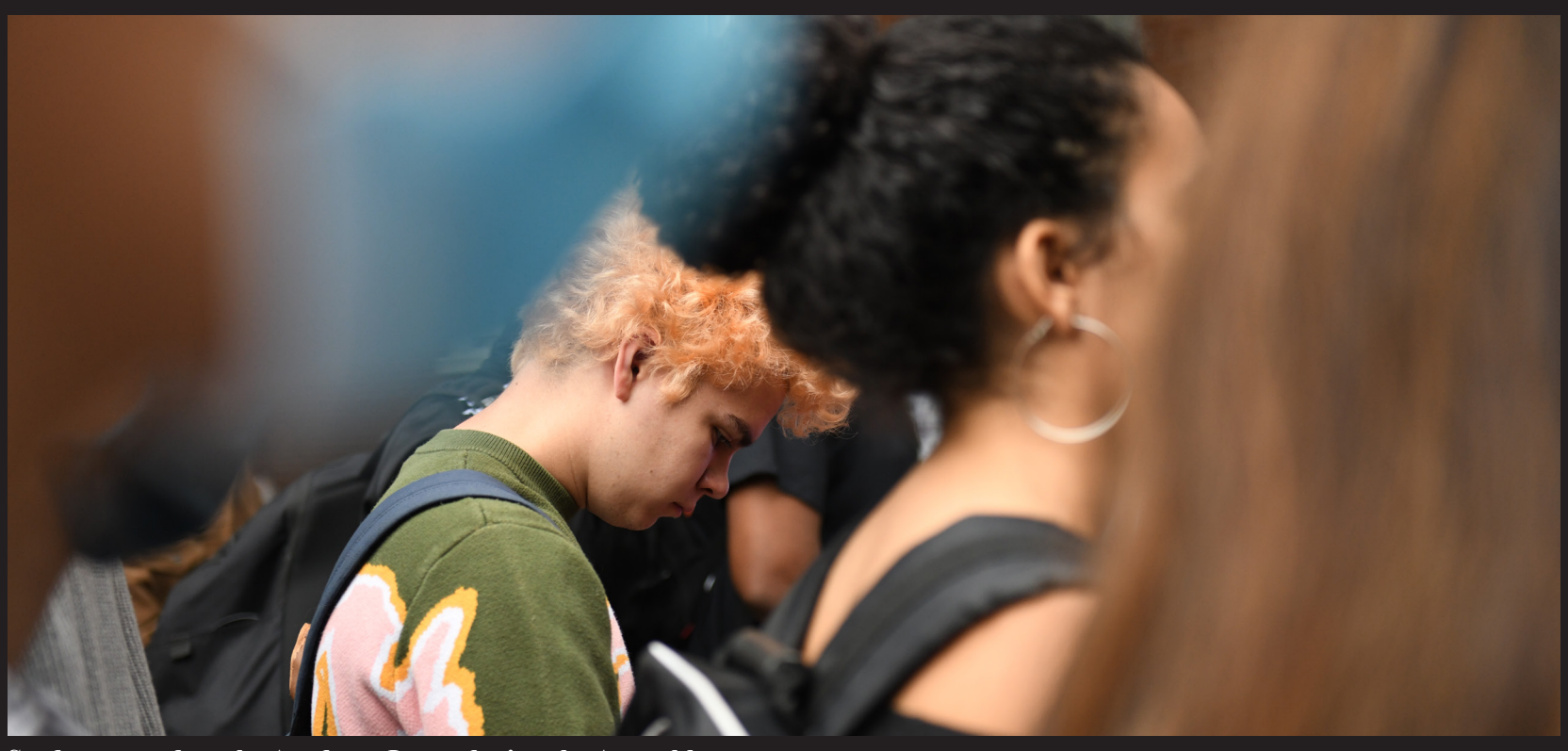
Community Responds to Alumna's *Vanity Fair* Article



Students stand on the Academy Lawn during the Assembly protest.

By SELIM KIM, SAFIRA SCHIOWITZ, CLARK WU and ANDREW YUAN

On Monday, September 13, *Vanity Fair* released an article, "Mr. Weber's Confession," by Nancy Jo Sales '82 which detailed her experiences with the Academy's sexual assault reporting process.

Sales' article details how Director of Student Well-Being, Dr. Christina Palmer, contacted Sales on September 10, 2020 by phone and questioned her about the allegation that now-retired English teacher David Weber had sexually assaulted her.

Sales denied the allegations Palmer shared with her. However, Sales wrote that the Academy continued its investigation into her involvement with Weber, even after her denial. The investigation eventually led to Weber's confession of "hugging and kissing a student... in the 1980s," according to Principal William Rawson's subsequent all-school email.

Rawson addressed the impacts of the Vanity Fair article in an all-school speech on Tuesday, September 21. He promised to reexamine how the Academy will support students, student leaders and the entire school community when traumatic events occur, and to "put structures and

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Students Protest Academy's Sexual Misconduct Reporting Policy

By ANVI BHATE, LAUREN KIM, MINSEO KIM, ELLIE ANA SPERANTSAS, KENDRA WANG and ANDREW YUAN

"Take back our childhood." "Hold the Academy accountable." "BELIEVE + PRIORITIZE SURVIVORS." Boldly lettered on cardstock, these words embodied the stances of students on strike from classes last Friday as they demanded a response from the Academy addressing its history of sexual misconduct.

Following the publication of Nancy Jo Sales' '82 Vanity Fair article entailing the Academy's sexual assault cases, student leaders of the Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA), Exonians Against Sexual Assault (EASA), Feminist Union and Transitions collaborated to organize an Assembly protest September 17 on the Academy Lawn, where the leaders shared personal anecdotes and encouraged fellow Exonians to sign a petition asking to "hold the Academy accountable for supporting its Student Leaders" in regard to sexual assault cases. This petition voiced the "unfair burden that the Academy places on student leaders due to their negligence in communications surrounding sexual misconduct" and outlines specific demands and calls for accountability; it is published in full on page 8 in this issue of *The Exonian*. Later, students began a class strike, congregating on the steps of the Lamont Art Gallery for the remainder of the school day, demanding that the Academy recognize the levels of student distress and emotional well-being.

Led by members of the Feminist Union, EASA, GSA and Transitions, the Assembly protest lasted for 30 minutes, with students, faculty, staff members and deans present. Student leaders delivered speeches demanding changes and expressing disappointments in the Academy's sexual assault reporting policies.

As senior Michelle Park read to the hundreds of students and faculty gathered on the Academy lawn: "To the preps and lowers: welcome to campus. I bet that this is not how you expected your first week of school to go, but this is Exeter for you."

Assembly Protest Features Student Speeches

Senior and Feminist Union co-head Siona Jain described sexism at the Academy. "When you are a woman at Exeter, you will be told your voice doesn't matter even when the matter concerns you. When you're a woman at Exeter, you will be judged, not based on what you bring to the table, but based on your stomach, shoulders, and chest. You may not be considered a scholar or leader when you're a woman," Jain said in her speech at the protest.

Upper and EASA co-head Riley Jones added to the discussion of the culture of sexual assault at Exeter. "Like many of you, I was given 'the talk' by my parents the night before I moved into Exeter. My mom sat me down and we made a plan. Always stand by the door. Never go into a faculty member's home alone. Always tell someone where you are. Don't walk by yourself at night. I assured her that I would be fine, that we would probably never see more allegations in the news, and that Exeter is a place where I will, above all, I will be safe," Jones said. "But after every 'Letter To Our Community' that pops up out of nowhere in my inbox,

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Senior and Feminist Union co-head Michelle Park speaks at the Assembly strike.

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plans in place so that we can provide students the support they need."

Additionally, Rawson promised to consider structural changes to processes concerning cases of sexual misconduct, "as we did two years ago, to better position the school, to provide support that students need when reporting an assault," he said. "When participating in an investigation, we will ensure that we have the resources. We will ensure that we have the resources and expertise, including expert consultants where appropriate, necessary to fulfill the commitments that we make today."

On the same day, Rawson communicated with *The Exonian* to address questions from the Vanity Fair article. In this communication, Rawson stated that "the article addresses numerous complex and highly-sensitive matters, from a narrow perspective and based on incomplete or sometimes wrong information."

According to Sales' article, Rawson's statements during the 2019 sit-in included statements such as, "You're saying that it's [misconduct] happening all the time. You say whatever we're doing, it's not enough, so let's figure out what more we should do, and we'll do it," and "I'm probably more equipped to handle these things because I have a lot of legal training...and I'm used to seeing two sides to a story.'"

In an interview with *The Exonian,* Rawson clarified that he intended to understand how the rate at which students reported sexual assault "might relate to concerns about the reporting process and the support victims will receive, and how it relates to other factors that need to be addressed on our campus."

"There is no perfect process for reporting something so painful and personal as sexual assault, but we want a process that victims of sexual assault will use, and we want victims to feel supported throughout," Rawson said.

"The Academy views cases of sexual assault first and foremost as deeply painful, sensitive matters, but they do have a legal component as we are required to report all allegations of sexual assault to the Exeter Police Department," Rawson added. "Our goal always is to conduct an investigation, and make any subsequent public disclosure, in a way that minimizes harm to survivors and anyone else who might be impacted by the investigation."

"I do not investigate allegations of student sexual misconduct, and do not decide if an assault has occurred. We have a diverse team of experienced professionals on campus who handle cases and work with independent outside investigators who examine the facts," Rawson said.

"I do believe my past training is helpful and important to my understanding of these issues and my oversight role, and I continue to undertake training on these very important subjects. I also spend time advancing our preventative measures, and supporting colleagues who focus on that important work," Rawson continued.

Director of Student Well-Being Christina Palmer expressed that the *Vanity Fair* article does not accurately portray the nature of her work and the relationships she has formed in her four years at the Academy.

In the *Vanity Fair* article, Sales wrote of her conversation with Palmer: "So that's why I was stunned when, on September 10, 2020, I got a call from Palmer, asking me brusquely, after a few pleasantries: 'When you were a student at Exeter, did you have a sexual relationship with Mr. Weber?' She advised me it would be best if I could be brief, as she only had a few minutes for this conversation."

When asked if this was an accurate characterization of the interaction, Palmer wrote, "When allegations about reportable incidents are made, my role is to inform, not interview or investigate an alleged victim/survivor, so they are not blindsided by a possible call from the police. I also offer support and resources. Sometimes the alleged victim/survivor shares information with me, but I don't seek out that information by asking questions. More often than not, the alleged victim/survivor will have many questions which I cannot answer (because I don't know the answers/details)."

"It is important to note, when historical allegations are made that are reportable, even if a victim/survivor denies the allegations, we are legally required to report them to the Exeter Police Department according to the Memorandum of Understanding with them. Cases are handled by a group of people who support students or alums as they understand the details of what happened. No one person does this work alone." Palmer continued.

Palmer provided an overview of the reporting process for sexual assault cases on campus. She noted that few reports of sexual assault are made directly to her, "as students will often go to teachers, advisers, or other adults they know."

"Once someone has made me aware of a possible report, I reach out to the student and their adviser to set up a meeting. I always meet with students who may have been harmed with another adult present. This practice is to ensure the student has someone that they are comfortable with," Palmer said.

"I have never been in a position that I had so many ongoing cases that I could not manage or give my focused attention and support to a student. I do not investigate allegations of student sexual misconduct, do not decide if an assault has occurred and have no influence over the investigation or discipline outcomes of cases," Palmer said.

Palmer emphasized that "all my decisions, communications and organization in regards to reporting happen in consultation with others; I am in constant communication with the assistant principal, general counsel, dean of students and Exeter Police."

Palmer also discussed her implementations, including an Affirmative Consent Policy as well as several all-campus curricula embedded in Health and Human Development classes. "I will always seek to partner with students about support and justice for those harmed by sexual violence," Palmer said.

"I also recognize for some students that you may have lost trust in me, my role, and the school reporting process, and therefore, I believe it is important to speak as much as I can with students without breaching confidentiality. My door is open to any and all students who want to speak with me," Palmer continued.

Among other programs and training for handling of sexual assault cases, Palmer is a member of the Rockingham County Sexual Assault Response Team (SART), and attends its monthly meetings. "I am the only educator who regularly attends along with law enforcement, county DA's office, child advocates, HAVEN and other professionals in this field," she said.

SART meetings focus on informing attendees about laws regarding sexual assault and best practices for handling cases of sexual assault, as well as case studies.

Palmer emphasized that her role in reports of misconduct is not to be an interviewer or investigator. Rather, "I am determining if an incident is reportable or not," she stated. "My focus is safety, support and care for the student, informing them that I believe them," Palmer continued. She also directs students to support systems such as counselors both within and outside of school and HAVEN.

Palmer said that she then explains the reporting process to the student, "the possibility of a school investigation and their right to decide if they want to participate in it or not, and the process of informing parents."

"It's important to note," Palmer continued, "if a student wants to meet with someone else besides me initially or at some other time in the process, they can ask their adviser or another trusted adult."

Students React to Rawson's Initial Email

The Academy's initial response to Sales' article was unsatisfactory to many students. Senior and Transitions co-head Adaeze Barrah felt "disgusted." "Reading Rawson's email was in and of itself disappointing (we're dealing with this again?), but after reading the article in conjunction with the school's response, I felt an element of disrespect," Barrah said. "Sales denounces Palmer and Rawson as a result of their poor response to a prospective sexual assault, and here Rawson is recommending Palmer as an outlet in his email."

"The only thing I'm able to say is that we're dealing with the same problems," Barrah said. "I would like to see the Academy invest in multiple counselors that are more diverse and more trauma informed. I would like to see the Academy shift the burden of caring for survivors from literal children to the people whom they pay to take care of said survivors...I remain cynical, but who am I to say that the Academy isn't working to that end?"

"I feel as though the Academy employs a policy against sexual assault on the grounds that it is considered ethically wrong, but not necessarily on the grounds that it is personally damaging to be a survivor," Barrah added. "...The culture of continuously supporting survivors does not seem to be there because the general consensus isn't that people support survivors; it's just that sexual assault is wrong. This culture perpetuates the idea that a stance against sexual assault comes from an appeal to reputation rather than an appeal to the legitimate emotions of human beings."

Senior and Exonians Against Sexual Assault (EASA) co-head Lyric Zimmerman shared similar thoughts. "I felt nausea and anger. A lot of anger. It's one thing to normalize assault on campus. It's another thing to normalize complete disregard for the words coming out of a victim's mouth. It's something you can barely comprehend as a human being," Zimmerman said. "The things Sales touched on in her article makes you feel ashamed to be a part of this school, to use this school's name to get into college. Makes me ashamed for doing any of that."

"We just want news, information, communication, not just complete disregard for our humanity. I would've liked to see some proper accountability and an apology. I would like a f[******] apology. That would be beautiful to hear," Zimmerman added. "That they understand what they did, how much they hurt. You hear the word harm, but you never hear 'I am so sorry for the pain that I inflicted, how my ignorance and my stupidity and my inability to empathize and to think harmed you.'"

"Until we can say that every student is being supported and loved, until we can say that the kids who are using their power to inflict pain have stopped, the culture of sexual assault is not abolished in any form. Posters don't change that. Maybe taking away school dances and public forms of interaction in times of COVID gave people the perception that it changed, but it didn't," Zimmerman said.

"This was evident when kids started laughing over a

Students gather at the steps of the Academy lawn as part of the Assembly strike, as Principal William Rawson looks on.

Community Responds to Article, Continued

letter to the community sent during one of our school blocks. I don't believe there's been any change because we weren't yelling loud enough. The school's not losing money. They're not losing social status or appeal. They're not losing the alumni's support," Zimmerman reflected. "If the endowment isn't being affected, from an administrative standpoint, why would they change the system?"

Members of the Student Council (StuCo) have considered their role in recent events and discussions. Senior and Student Council Vice President George Venci said upon reading the *Vanity Fair* article, his "first instinct was to help and provide support to all students and ensure a sense of community for all students."

He sent an email encouraging dormitory and residential representatives to extend support to students. "An alternative purpose [for the email] was to support those dormitory and residential representatives and reiterate that the Executive Board has their back. Student leaders need to make themselves available and accessible to the students in their dorm. I hope that StuCo can always encourage that for our members," Venci said.

Venci said that the Student Council can "stay active in the discussions with the administration" in the future, bringing up the student body's concerns about sexual assault reporting policies during one of their regular meetings with Rawson, as well as stay updated on the investigation protocols.

Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) co-heads senior Jaden Sides and lower Rowan Flanagan had different reactions to the Academy's response. Flanagan felt "shock" and believed that both the article and Rawson's email were revealing of "the true colors of the campus and the Administration."

Sides agreed and noted the "powerless" and "desensitized" feeling that came along with hearing about the article. "I felt so numb to it...I wasn't particularly surprised...I was here for this sit-in my prep year. I was here when all this stuff was released about Kaminski and when this stuff was originally released about Weber," Sides said. "When first hearing about it, it felt like this awful sense of 'this has happened before.' I felt kind of just a sense of acknowledgement and then a bit horrified with myself that this is what I consider normal."

Many students have recognized that the Academy's policies disproportionately harm BIPOC students and queer students. "Queer students are very ignored, in the concept of reporting. A lot of these policies are horribly exclusionary to students," Sides said. "They...can't report without having their relationship outed and being forced to move dorms, having their parents notified and being outed to the community...the pressure is especially there for LGBTQ+ students on this campus and the disparities in reporting...I imagine that reporting would be even less common among LGBTQ+ students."

Flanagan pointed out the increased risk marginalized populations are at for assault. "GSA, Black people, Black women, people of color … in general, are statistically more likely to be victims of sexual assault, but also statistically less likely to be listened to, or to be given proper justice for what has been done to them…," Flanagan said.

Barrah shared similar thoughts. "I am a Black girl. I am statistically more likely to be sexually assaulted. I think this amplifies my feelings on the issue because I have more of a personal stake in what my communities think about sexual assault," Barrah said. "I hate having to say this, because it's almost as though I am predicting that it will happen to me (God forbid!) but I have to be frank. I really don't feel very safe anymore."

Since the Academy's response, many student leaders have felt the burden to support the entirety of the student body's distress. "I felt like I had to be a monolith. I felt like I had to represent all of my identities and be the person that a lot of people could come to and talk to," Flanagan said. "I felt that...I needed to be involved with everything possible because I didn't want someone to look around and not see themselves represented...even if that requires stretching myself thin. I felt I had to sacrifice some of myself, in order to help others."

On Thursday, September 16, three days after the release of the Vanity Fair article, student leaders from EASA, GSA, Fem Club and Transitions held a community space for "grief, healing, support for queer and BIPOC students, tangible action, and questions," according to their email.

"As coheads of the Feminist Union, Exonians Against Sexual Assault, Transitions, and Gender & Sexuality Alliance, we've noticed a repeated pattern of behavior, routine letters from the Principal, and a complete lack of change," the email stated.

"We want to acknowledge and give autonomy to the complex nature of Ms. Sales' story, but importantly, we want to note that her article has sparked conversations about sexual assault reporting on our campus and has shed light on how the reporting process fails to be trauma-informed."

"We understand that for the older students at Exeter, this article may bring to mind the tiring cycle of demanding transparency about the reporting process and sexual assault on our campus and in turn, failing to see substantive change from the administration. For new students at Exeter, we understand that this article is jarring—our campus is a place where you should feel safe, and we are deeply disappointed that this will have sparked your first conversations on campus about sexual assault, consent, and healthy relationships," the email continued.

Upper and Transitions co-head Priya Nwakanma described the planning process behind the Community Healing Session. EASA, Feminist Club, GSA and Transitions co-heads met on Tuesday, September 14 and spent the following two days organizing the event.

Nwakanma said that the Community Healing Session, "in contrast to the protest, was a collaboration between the students and the administration."

"We met with some [of the] deans and we got their suggestions, we got their concerns and we did our best to address those concerns," Nwakanma said. "A lot that went into it, a lot of people who had to sign off on it, and [it was] a lot of work for everyone involved."

Additionally, Nwakanma commented on the improved inclusivity of the conversations about sexual assault among student leaders. "I really respect and admire Fem Club leaders for making the decision to loop Transitions into this, because I know originally it was just Fem Club and EASA, and they felt like they needed a voice specifically for women of color. And obviously they looped GSA into it as well. I think that was a good decision," she said.

Sides shared their reflections on attending the community space. "Since we had affinity spaces, I feel like a lot of people left with a stronger feeling of community and a stronger feeling that they are not alone here and that there are people that they can go to. Exeter, despite its flaws, is not just this miserable place of just you go there and you're bound to just be just sad," Sides said.

Zimmerman said, "I hope people who attended the community circle left feeling heard at the end of the day. I wanted them to walk out of the Thompson Gym feeling as though their anger, their sadness and their confusion, in some way, shape or form, was a little lifted from their shoulders from just listening to others. In listening to the voices and the ideas and the pain of others and in keeping the pride and the passion of others with them. That is how you build community."

Some students believe that much of the solution to the Academy's problems lie in institutional changes that encourage a shift in perspective to the way sexual assault cases are handled. Sides said, "There has to be a system in place where the people that are receiving these reports are able to be trusted and possibly are more relatable to the student body so that there are people of color students can report to—people that they feel understand their experience in that these reports are actually acknowledged and are looked at not through a legal lens, but through a lens of 'this student is hurt. What, what does the student need?'"

"I know people of color, queer people, and people of other disproportionately affected minorities that have reported sexual assaults and been ignored by Palmer, by CAPS, by admin, by everybody. I know people have reported at different times and gotten ignored regardless of whether it was four years ago or one year ago," Sides added.

Flanagan expressed similar thoughts and added how trained professionals were needed within the reporting and handling process. "We are teenagers and you need years and years of training to know how to make things trauma-centered. And Palmer is not trained in that. We are not trained in that. You need professionals that are trained in how to deal with trauma, " Flanagan said. "So expecting Palmer and students, and any people that do not have that training, is unreasonable and will further traumatize people."

A Statement from Dr. Palmer

I feel disheartened. Disheartened that my work in support of victims/survivors on this campus is being over shadowed by this article that does not describe my work and the relationships I have on this campus. This work is my passion and career, and I am proud of what has been accomplished. I have felt honored to be one of the voices at the table for victims/survivors and anyone else impacted by sexual violence to ensure that this work remains a priority and does not get lost at the school. I understand for many victims/survivors, it might feel that no one cares or gets it… which is untrue.

In my 4 years here we have established an Affirmative Consent Policy, an all-campus curriculum embedded in HHD classes on Consent, Healthy Relationships, Bystander training, dating violence, resources and now boundaries (which will be new this year). Being able to bring required programming such as HAVEN's Consent workshop, Boundary, and Bystander workshops, Now that We're Men (the play), introducing last year our first Take Back the Night (to give victims/survivors a space to speak), celebrating Denim Day, restorative justice circle practice that helped influence community conduct, being a part of the development and establishing a protocol practice for reporting as well as inviting student clubs such as EASA and Fem club to partner in some of these programs, including presenting to student leaders about the reporting process this year. I will always seek to partner with students about support/justice for those harmed by sexual violence.

I also recognize for some students that you may have lost trust in me, my role, and the school reporting process and therefore I believe it is important to speak or as much as I can with students without breaching confidentiality. My door is open to any and all students who want to speak with me.

When interviewed by *The Exonian,* Palmer provided a statement regarding her work experience and reaction to the Vanity Fair article. Her statement can be found in the top right corner of this page.

Senior Harry Gorman said, "You know, sexual assault is happening on this campus. We know it exists, and we know that the processes in place are ill-considered. But it's all hanging in the air. Reading the history of sexual assault in the article and thinking about just the utter lack of respect the survivors faced was a horrifying experience. We need victims to be able to find some peace afterwards, or at the very least be able to go on the path to find peace while on this campus."

"It is our collective grief and anger and sadness and the collective sense of totally being fed up with all this that drove this change. We truly owe our thanks to the student leaders who stood up during Community Healing and during the protest on Friday," Gorman added.

Entering the Academy as a new upper last year, Gorman noted that as a newer member of the Exeter community he felt less entitled to have a voice during this time of change. "Having family who came here before myself, I knew a little about what was going on. It's not uncomfortable for me to join in these conversations, and I wouldn't say I'm excluded from these conversations, but I'm always cautious to not step over others who have more experience being at the Academy than myself."

Sides agreed. "There are things that happen that are just really like a slap in the face and where you realize 'oh, so this is what's happening," Sides said. "It's not just the Administration that doesn't care. It's not just certain students that don't care. It's not just specific teachers. It's really ingrained in the culture of the academy."

Flanagan said, "I think for me, which is incredibly just sad...is having a conversation with preps about how to dress when they have certain classes and certain teachers, and having to warn them about the fact that they're not safe in their own school environment and that not every adult that they are told to trust can be trusted."

"There is kind of little that you can do about that…'disheartening' is the lightest word I can use in this circumstance," Flanagan continued.

Senior Lindsay Machado noted how, although there seems to be some form of change, most efforts are still student-led. "All [the Academy] is really doing is renaming these policies to something that's more palatable to students...I don't think we're really accomplishing anything at all. There have been changes in the past few years that I have appreciated: more consent workshops, more education and awareness for students...And I really think that credit goes to EASA," Machado said. "I think the administration is listening and I think they see us and I think they hear us, but ultimately this school is a business with a legal reputation. And I think that any leader or trustee board of said school is going to prioritize that first."

Machado added, "It hit me the other day when I was walking to class and I saw my good friend, Ana Casey, who is a co-head of EASA and had been doing so much in the last week...I saw her walking to class and she had, you know, the backpack and it kind of hit me that Ana is just a high school student and she is...still legally a child."

Like many students who attended the Academy in 2019, senior Teja Vankireddy expressed that the wave of change initiated by the sit-in at that time seemed to subside after a few weeks.

Vankireddy acknowledged that there were some changes implemented after the sit-in, such the discontinuation of Principal's Discretion and the creation of the Sexual Misconduct Committee. However, in Vankireddy's view, the sentiments surrounding sexual assault on campus did not change.

Vankireddy hopes that the demands outlined in the petition written by student leaders will catalyze improvements to the Academy's response to sexual assault cases. "I think they did a really good job of picking out tangible actions the school could take. Because a lot of what the school does is very performative, in that it's just spewing different [words] like 'we will do better.'"

Vankireddy recalled finding out about the Vanity Fair article before its publication. "There was a faculty email that was sent out the day before [the article publication]. I was in the common room and then an anonymous faculty member said something about the article," Vankireddy said. "And then I went online. I looked at it, looked it up and it was releasing the next day."

Upper Ina Mason commented on how Academy culture surrounding sexual assault has remained unchanged. "I think that the culture of this school is one that we have not talked about for a long time, because in personal experience and just hearing from other people, people are getting hurt on this campus," Mason said.

Additionally, Mason expressed that "the nature of [how] people talk about women is not healthy. It's not good. It's not right. Because a lot of people say that certain things are over-exaggerated when things are reported, that they're 'small' things and that whoever was the victim was over-exaggerating or over-emotional."

Mason hopes that misconceptions about sexual assault and sexual assault victims can be dismantled and that conversations surrounding them can be expanded to consistently include voices from people of all identities.

The wide range of student reactions to the Vanity Fair article seem to share a desire for progress, which students reported not experiencing despite Rawson's promises during and in the aftermath of the 2019 sit-in. The lack of trust between the Academy and the student body prompted student leaders to demand changes to the Academy's handling of sexual assault on campus in a protest that started on September 17. The community awaits as the Academy reevaluates its processes, policies and culture.