

Reporting on Exeter and Sexual Assault

By Anne Brandes

Content Warning: This article involves sexual assault. Phillips Exeter has a number of resources for survivors in the Exeter community. To access these resources, please refer to the Exeter website's "Contacts and Resources" page. Additionally, if you find yourself distressed by any details, please seek confidential help at the National Sexual Assault Hotline: (800) 656-4673.

On Nov. 19, the last print edition of my tenure, I conclude reporting on the Academy just as I started in 2017. Years pass; the story remains the same. Exeter has a culture of sexual assault.

Disclaimer: I will write primarily about the articles that I have contributed to, since I hope to provide a perspective on sexual assault rooted in my experience speaking with survivors and other members of the Exeter community. There have been other articles on sexual misconduct over the past three years and a half years, too. Please refer to The Exonian's website and archives.

The first time I recognized Exeter's culture of sexual assault was in the spring of 2018, when I co-wrote "New Affirmative Consent Policy to Be Implemented." As a prep writing one of my first investigative articles, I was looking for an anecdote to drive home the importance of adding affirmative consent to the standing policy on assault. This was too easy a task.

this article turned out to be a story about misconduct. That week, Sep. 27, 2018, half of *The Exonian's* front page contained articles about sexual assault. While my co-writer and I spoke with survivors about how their fear of assailants in the classroom impacted their well-being, other reporters wrote about how Phillips Exeter Alumni for Truth and Healing (PATH), an action group comprised of survivors of sexual abuse at PEA and their supporters in the alumni community, released a petition challenging the Academy's investigation practices.

Even in a third-page news article, "Alumni Community Convenes for Exeter Leadership Weekend," alumni called attention to the "Academy's past and present awareness of sexual misconduct and its relation to general media regarding sexual harassment." There's something distinctly wrong, I feel, when an article like this—*The Exonian's* opportunity to spotlight alumni—turns into another call for intervention.

The next week, I co-wrote my first article on an Academy lawsuit: "Former Admissions Officer Sues PEA for Discrimination." We reported on a faculty termination due to a sexual relationship with a student and his partner's subsequent suit against the Academy. This same edition—for the second week in a row—featured a front page mostly covering sexual assault. The other article I co-wrote that week was informed by Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court. "Students Note Bro-Culture Affecting PEA" covered another aspect of Exeter's culture of sexual misconduct: objectification in dormitory life. Below the fold, "Community Time Focuses on Consent" reported on an all-student body workshop with a ringing criticism that student leaders weren't given proper training.

At this point, I walked into the Sunday writers assignment meetings anticipating the inevitable sexual assault beat of the week. I wrote my articles and collected anecdotes from survivors, pretty sure that no one was going to read them. I spoke with my senior friends, who had grown in number since prep spring, about each week's article, and we talked about all the new stories we'd heard. This all felt normal.

I wish I could explain to you some of the stories that didn't make it to print.



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23rd. Rereading these articles now, I note the timelines provided by adults, some of which promised cultural change in a year's time.

The next school year, I co-wrote several articles about new policies, including "Faculty Pass Misconduct Proposal" on Sept. 19 and "Academy Hosts Consent Workshops for Student Body" on Oct. 31, 2019. My first edition as Editor, we ran the article "Uppers Discuss Sexual Misconduct Prevention" after a bystander training session. Though these efforts had little to do with cultural change, I felt survivors and their allies had the ear of the adult community. Change was in their air, I told friends on The Exonian, and I was grateful to report on the Academy during this hopeful evolution.

I spoke too soon. During the spring, when we all received an email regarding Math Instructor Jerzy Kaminski's sexual assault of a student, The Exonian got hold of the case's affidavit. For all of us on the article, the document was difficult to read. It felt the same as my prep spring. Kaminski had taught most of my friends at some point.

Recently, The Exonian spoke to another survivor. The Executive Board had to tell them that, though we would normally offer our platform to a survivor, publishing an article in the paper would likely do them more harm than good. We worried that the attention their voice would receive would be fleeting and that, at some point, whatever they wrote could be used against them in court. This piece is a response to that meeting.

I note the genuine efforts of the adult community. In April 2018, then-President of the Trustees Tony Downer unequivocally clarified the Academy's position on sexual assault in a discussion about Interim Principal candidates. The purpose of the Interim Principal role, Downer explained, is "bringing closure to the journey we have been on over the past few years, addressing our past shortcomings and flaws in the realm of sexual misconduct and endeavoring to provide support and bring comfort to those who have experienced harm."

A culture of sexual assault has persisted at the Academy, then, despite the hopes of survivors, students, parents, alumni, faculty, administrators and trustees.



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“Does Exeter Have A Rape Culture?” and “Sexual Assault Galvanizes Alumni Advocacy.” Those two are cherry picked—but most of these papers have a glancing, or direct, nod to sexual assault at Exeter. I can already see the 142nd Board’s articles aging in the chilly newsroom air.

Dear Exeter community, the Class of 2021 will graduate too. My experiences as a journalist at the Academy will leave with me in May, and so will the experiences of my co-writers when they go their separate ways. Survivors will leave, too, and the Exeter experience—and trauma—will hang with them. I worry for the new students we leave behind.

As Editor, I like when our articles end with some kind of gesture towards a brighter future. After all, why report on the Academy if you don’t believe it can be improved?

I end with a call for transparency. Transparency, by the way, is the whole point of reporting on these cases. But our coverage is not enough. I believe, obviously, that The Exonian is a terrific platform to spur change at the Academy, but I am saddened to say that the paper is simply not enough in this case.

Transparency, possibly the most difficult objective when addressing sexual assault, is the only way I think we can face our cultural failure. I understand the intrinsic need for privacy in sexual assault cases, but I am not calling for details; I am calling for public statistics. I’d like to see how many mandated reports were made by the Director of Student Well-Being’s Office and the types of reports made. I’d like to see these numbers over time. I’d like to see these numbers publicized.

As a student journalist, I know sexual assault is unlikely to be eradicated from the Academy. However, I don’t think it’s right that new students have to be gradually clued into, or experience, Exeter’s culture of sexual assault to understand it exists.

Naming matters. Here, I’ve named my experience as a student and journalist at the Academy. I spent the last three years reporting on sexual assault. Remember these articles, these cases. Remember the cases that never made it into the paper. Let’s set the record straight now. After we leave, as we all

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