

Sep 8

# Sexual Assault Galvanizes Alumni Advocacy

## *PEA Updates E-book, Hires Experts to Address Concerns*

In the wake of the Exeter community's response to reports of misdemeanor sexual assault on campus, administrators have taken a series of measures designed to ensure student safety and well being. On July 12, *The Boston Globe* published an article detailing reports that the Academy had mishandled an alleged sexual misconduct between two students.

Community members have expressed outrage and anguish following the publication, and some alumni threatened to withhold donations until the administration changed their handling of sexual misconduct.

Over the summer, in a letter to PEA Principal Lisa MacFarlane and the President of the Board of Trustees Nicie Panetta, Zoha Qamar '15 called for the administration to implement changes to school practices and procedures. "Past attempts at dialogue have repeatedly illustrated fundamental failures in Exeter's administrative responses," she wrote in her letter. "These empty promises to simply 'talk' or 'listen' dilute the truth, urgency and gravity of the situation. Exeter needs to make substantive changes in response this time. We will not accept continued deferral, nor silent head nods."

"I hope that the response to the allegations takes into account that this seems to be a systemic problem at Exeter, rather than a problem localised to a few individuals."

The Academy's investigations into the sexual misconduct case detailed in *The Globe* article resulted in Rev. Robert Thompson—who allegedly intervened with the student's complaint—being placed on leave. MacFarlane said she could not comment specifically on a legal investigation or on employment matters.

"We are doing our own review, and we are committed to taking appropriate action. I truly wish we could more fully respond to your questions," she said, "but the specific situation you are inquiring about is in the hands of law enforcement, and therefore the school administration will not be sharing any additional information."

Other Exeter administrators and faculty were contacted by *The Exonian* but could not comment due to the ongoing investigation.

unsafe illegal visitations; further, the sexual misconduct and mandatory reporting policies were clarified and a policy around sexting was added to the E-book.

In addition, the Academy published a Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Action Plan, updated the staff and faculty handbooks and Code of Conduct to reinforce the Academy's stance on sexual assault and revised the Memorandum of Understanding with the Exeter Police Department. The school hired legal experts to review current policies and procedures and consultants to report on and investigate cases of sexual misconduct. MacFarlane has been in touch with members of the community throughout the summer, detailing the steps the Academy has taken to address the concerns raised in and as a result of *The Globe* article.

Meanwhile, also following the publication of *The Globe* article, more than 1,000 alumni signed a petition to withhold donations to the school until concrete changes are made in handling cases and supporting victims of sexual assault. The authors of the letter, led by Evan Soltas '12, were "outraged and deeply concerned by several recent reports of sexual assault and by the Academy administration's incompetent handling of these incidents," and felt that "there can be no illusions left about the Academy's breathtaking inadequacy on sexual assault."

The vast number of signatures represented an "emotional response," said Michael Whitfield Jones '75. He said that many former students felt betrayed by the authority figures of the school, explaining that people don't want to support and donate to the school if there is even a chance for "young and vulnerable open minds" to be abused and not supported. He condemned the deans who spoke with the student, but did not report the alleged sexual assault, noting that there was great disparity between the "assuring letters" during reunions and the steps taken to address the issue.

In addition to alumni efforts, current PEA students have also expressed concern and disappointment. Senior Claire Dauge-Roth spearheaded the authoring of an open letter addressed to the trustees. The signatories of the letter felt that "the disregard shown for current students and their trauma is troubling" and that "Exeter must do better."

The letter specifically advocated for clarification on the process of reporting a sexual assault, for the administration to meet the needs of assault victims by ensuring access to therapy and support systems and for leaders in the community to be adequately trained concerning sexual assault.

In addition, students in the letter have demanded that the administration not threaten victims of assault through no-contact contracts among other methods, for statistics on sexual assault and harassment on campus to be released annually and for the correction of inconsistencies between the E-book and New Hampshire Law concerning sexual assault and harassment.

Dauge-Roth also worked with faculty and administrators to found a new club, Exonians Against Sexual Assault, which intends to advocate for student safety. Uppers Vinayak Kurup and Will Soltas and senior Emily Robb have created a new publication called MVMMENT Magazine, to encourage awareness of sexual assault and rape culture. Robb hoped that a publication would encourage parents, students and alumni to create more "thoughtful and less impulsive discourse." Although there was productive conversation online, she believed MVMMENT could prevent impulsive comments and insensitive remarks.

investigated sexual assault and misconduct at 67 private schools in New England, including recent stories on Phillips Academy and St. George's School.

Though members of the community have felt disheartened by the series of sexual misconduct cases, they also view the backlash created by *The Globe* article as an opportunity for substantive change. Tez Clark '13, who responded along with other alums to the recent administrative response in a blog, "Do Better, Exeter", hopes that the recent news incites self-reflection and growth within the community.

"The story, as reported in *The Globe*, is certainly unacceptable—but in addition to the specifics mentioned in the article, I hope that the response to the allegations takes into account that this seems to be a systemic problem at Exeter, rather than a problem localised to a few individuals," Clark said.

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