

Sexual assault survivor to speak to students

The University of Toledo is celebrating Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April by hosting Liz Seccuro, a rape survivor, author and victims' advocate. She will speak at UT at 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 19 in Doermann Theater.

Seccuro was gang-raped in 1984 during her freshman year at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. She reported her situation to the dean of students and others at the university, but no one helped her to take further action.

"Being told by the dean of students that I was crazy and a liar discouraged me, but I kept going. I reported to whoever I could," Seccuro said. "Also, I know it's hard. So many survivors stay silent; they don't tell their roommates and friends because a lot of people, even unwittingly, don't say what it is considered the right thing. There's no script for it. It's really hard, being a secondary survivor."

Twenty years later, Seccuro's rapist sent her a letter, apologizing. She replied to him, asking him why he was reaching out to her now. They exchanged several emails back and forth, with him referring to the rape as something much more romantic. Seccuro became even more concerned and called the Charlottesville police department.

Seccuro didn't expect anything to come of it, but, soon after, she went back to Charlottesville to give her statement to the police and tell them her story. At the police station, Seccuro described the rape itself. After she finished, the detectives asked her if she would like to press charges against her rapist.

Seccuro said the moment was very emotional.

“I think it was very liberating to spend the afternoon telling my story, which I told countless times years before, to the regular police,” Seccuro said. “It took me by surprise, but it was also extraordinarily affirming and I was very emotional. I remember just crying a lot because it was like being heard for the first time, which is not the way it’s supposed to work. I felt very validated and at peace. Regardless of where it was going to go or if it was going to go forward, I felt that, and it’s so important for many survivors, to feel heard... it was a big moment.”

Kasey Tucker-Gail, director of the Center for Student Advocacy and Wellness, said Seccuro’s story and experience speaks to empowerment.

“It is important to students, faculty, staff and the community – her message is one of education, survival and advocacy,” Tucker-Gail said in an email interview. “How to take an event and turn it into a message of hope and empowerment.”

One in five women will be assaulted during their college career. Deborah Stoll, director of the YWCA Hope Center, said these are horrible odds and part of the reason they wanted to bring Seccuro to Toledo.

“I think, hopefully, they can relate to her because she was assaulted on a university campus,” Stoll said. “She was a student when this happened, a 17-year-old freshman, and we know from our work, it’s incredibly common for a college student to be the victim of sexual assault.”

Stoll said the most common time for sexual assault to occur is at the very beginning of their freshman year.

“At a time when youth should be having the adventure of a lifetime, coming to a university, perhaps living on their own for the first time, making new friends, charting their adult life, they should not have to face a sexual assault.”

By continuing to tell her story, Seccuro is keeping the issue of sexual assault alive and in people's minds.

"That this is not just a women's issue – but an issue for everyone – until it ends – it's in everyone's wheelhouse," Tucker-Gail said. "Education and awareness until it is eradicated. People need to continue to talk about this issue – we need to make it OK for everyone to talk about it. OK for victims to report, OK for victims to seek help, OK for people to advocate."

The free event is co-sponsored by the YWCA Hope Center and the Center for Student Advocacy and Wellness and is open to all UT community members.