

20 of 709 DOCUMENTS

USA TODAY

June 17, 1994, Friday, FINAL EDITION

Deaf women reveal silent secrets / At Gallaudet University, students are crying 'rape'

BYLINE: Carol J. Castaneda

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 11A

LENGTH: 787 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

Rape is a crime often cloaked in silence - and silence abounds at Gallaudet University.

At the nation's only liberal arts college for the deaf and hearing impaired, a growing circle of young women say they've been raped or sexually assaulted by classmates. Some insist they said "NO!" in sign language, but were ignored. Some say they cried out, but no one heard.

And while some say school officials have offered sympathy and help, most say they feel ostracized on campus, blamed for leveling charges that could tarnish their unique school's reputation.

Senior Cindy Ebeling says she was raped five years ago by another Gallaudet student.

"I never reported it," Ebeling, 22, says through a sign language interpreter. "I didn't feel like I would get adequate support."

Campuses across the nation are scrambling to handle students' increased reporting of rape and sexual assault.

But such charges hit particularly hard in the tight-knit world of Gallaudet - a place where students can shed the isolation of being deaf in a hearing world, and instead feel accepted and safe.

Gallaudet officials vow to root out the problem: "I can't begin to tell you how much we're concerned," President I. King Jordan said in a Today show interview this week. "We can't allow women to think that they can't report rape or sexual assault."

Gallaudet officials reported only one rape in the 1991-92 school year. But since a recent People magazine reported several Gallaudet students' rape charges, others are coming forward to say they also endured harassment and assaults.

"There are a lot of cases that go unreported," says Laura Lynn Helms, 23, who says she was raped in her dorm room but never told.

Both Ebeling and Helms say many of their friends have been raped or sexually assaulted but never reported it. "There is a great need to stop this kind of atmosphere of fear and humiliation," Helms says. "We need to provide more support."

Deaf women reveal silent secrets / At Gallaudet University, students are crying 'rape' USA TODAY June 17, 1994,
Friday, FINAL EDITION

A year ago, university officials formed a task force on sexual assault. But "it was not started because we suddenly thought this was more of a problem than at other universities," says task force chairwoman Jennifer Joseph.

Rather, she says, it was to help students define sexual misconduct, and set new procedures for helping victims. The task force report may be released this summer.

Gallaudet drew worldwide attention in 1988 when students protested the hiring of a hearing woman as president. Their demonstrations closed the school for a week until the woman agreed to resign and the school selected its first deaf president, Jordan.

Now the campus - a red brick oasis amid northeast Washington's dilapidated row houses - is gripped by the debate about rape.

Gallaudet's 2,200 students are a close-knit group: Communication is mostly nonverbal, but nonstop. So "If someone is raped, everyone finds out about it, and the stigma is hard to remove," says Ebeling. "It goes with you all the rest of your life."

Ebeling was 17 and attending a high school on the campus when a freshmen college student began to taunt her. He called her a "holy roller" until she drank with him - and when she became woozy, she says, he began "manipulating my body."

Only later could she bring herself to say, "I was raped."

Roberta Easley, 20, says she's comforted several friends who've been sexually assaulted - and if they report it, the university offers them counseling. But "it's kind of like a one-way street," says Easley. Women tell officials what happened to them, but officials don't keep them posted about discipline of the accused attackers.

University officials say they can't discuss disciplinary actions against students.

Some who say they were assaulted say the university denies the problem or dismisses their claims. "The security simply laugh at you," says Helms, or tell young women that if they were drinking, "You asked for it."

Students differ on how serious the problem is.

Brian Thorn, 25, says a small percentage of men on campus "do not respect the rights of women." But he said many more men will stop when a woman says no.

Four years ago in her dorm room, Helms says, she told her date in sign language, " 'No, No,' and he went against my will."

"The next day, he said he couldn't help it," she says. "I was devastated" - but because she had been drinking, she was afraid to report it.

Gallaudet doesn't want students like Helms to fear coming forward, says Roslyn Rosen, vice-president of academic affairs. "We encourage students who feel they have been violated to take it as far as they can" in seeking justice.

And if the administration discovers any ways in which it hasn't properly handled students' claims, she says, "We will make changes."

LOAD-DATE: June 18, 1994June 18, 1994June 18, 1994June 18, 1994June 18, 1994June 18, 1994

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS, b/w, Matt Mendelsohn, USA TODAY (3)

Deaf women reveal silent secrets / At Gallaudet University, students are crying 'rape' USA TODAY June 17, 1994,
Friday, FINAL EDITION

THE NATION

Copyright 1994 Gannett Company, Inc.