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Happy Graduation.

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Happy Graduation.

Abstract

High school graduation is often considered the first step into a life of new beginnings, independence, and quasi-adulthood. It is a time of celebration, a time to recognize that all of those years of hard work have paid off. Of course, there are graduation presents from family members to reward all of that work and congratulate the graduate for beginning of the rest of their lives. My graduation present, though, is something I hope I never find a use for. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

college, Gettysburg College, Graduation, orientation, Rape Culture, Self Defense, Self Defense Classes, Sexual Assault

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com. Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

HAPPY GRADUATION

December 11, 2017



High school graduation is often considered the first step into a life of new beginnings, independence, and quasi-adulthood. It is a time of celebration, a time to recognize that all of those years of hard work have paid off. Of course, there are graduation presents from family members to reward all of that work and congratulate the graduate for beginning of the rest of their lives. My graduation present, though, is something I hope I never find a use for.

Upon my dad's urging, my friends and I were all signed up for self defense classes in honor of our high school graduation.

At the time, I was excited to spend various self defense sessions with my best friends, learning how to get out of tricky holds, learning strikes, and practicing yelling "no" as loud as we could. Although I was definitely aware that what I was learning was intended to be a way to save my life and ensure my safety, there were times when I was

more caught up in the fun and awkwardness of wrestling with my closest friends than in the reality of what I was practicing.

It took some time for me to really process the twisted reality of the graduation present my friends and I received. We live in a world where as women, going off to college warrants the need for a self defense class. Once I was a high school graduate preparing to go off into the world of college, much of what I learned was how to avoid being a turned into another statistic about sexual assault. I feared being the one in six women to be sexually assaulted.

These statistics continued to haunt me throughout college orientation as we spent numerous hours being lectured at about beneficial resources regarding where to go if, or when, we became part of these statistics. I could not help but notice how most of these talks aimed at teaching the victim of assault what to do, rather than focusing on combating the problem of rape culture on college campuses.

Through self defense classes prior to coming to Gettysburg College, and the sexual assault programs I sat through during orientation, these fears and statistics bombarded me, and I began to understand the need to view my self defense classes differently, and in a more serious light.

Being a small girl starting her first year of college, walking around at night seemed to be the scariest thing I could possibly do. Every night for the first few weeks of school as I left the library and walked back to my dorm in darkness, my mind would race over the different ways somebody could attack me, and how I would get out of that attack. Although I felt moderately irrational, I was ready to call DPS at any second, and I became hyper-aware of every person that walked past me. For weeks I refused to go out to frats with my friends. The only way I felt as though I could ensure my safety from the seemingly unavoidable harm that was “just a part of college” was if I didn’t go out. Nothing, or no one, could harm me if I didn’t leave my room. Over time, I was able to relax slightly as I became more accustomed to life in college, but the fear that had been drilled into my mind remains present.

My graduation present was being trained to expect assault.

In my environmental science class, we learned about “declining baselines.” This term “describes the process of becoming accustomed to and accepting as normal worsening conditions.” My graduation present reveals the declining baseline of our society as a whole with regard to sexual assault against women. At the time, it seemed simply obvious that my friends and I would need to take a self defense class in order to prepare for our future lives in college. It seemed normal. After all, 23.1% of all undergraduate women in colleges across the country experience rape or sexual assault. I never questioned the fact that many of the girls I met once arriving to college had also taken self defense classes, and that it seemed perfectly normal for hours of orientation to be spent on what to do if you or a friend were sexually assaulted. In our society, walking back from the library at night and leaving one’s room on the weekend being considered “risky” if you’re a woman in college. That is certainly a declining state of normalcy.

My graduation present should not have been hours of training to learn how to stay safe through escaping unwanted advances just because, as my self defense instructor always told us, “there are some bad people out there who will just want to hurt you.” I should not have to walk across campus at night, mentally reviewing step after step of strikes and plans on what to do “just in case.” Rape culture and college life do not have to be synonyms. Instead of teaching women how to defend themselves as a gift before going off to college, let’s work on ending the normalization of rape culture in our society.

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