

# The Gazette

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## Debunking myths about rape

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A young couple who know each other from school meet at a bar. She asks him to walk her home. She invites him up to her apartment; they kiss. She tells him she's tired and that he should go. She gives him another kiss. He assumes she has changed her mind.

Sound familiar? This is the sort of scenario young people are asked to imagine during discussions led by members of the outreach team of the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society. Dressed in jeans and t-shirts, this energetic group of students provide healthy, approachable role models as they reach out to their peers and attempt to battle stereotypes associated with sexual assault.

"When we use that scenario, we ask students to explain what happened," said Kristina Heese, 20, a second-year McGill student who co-ordinates the outreach program together with Daniel Hertzman, 21.

"Their first question is, 'Did she say no?' They also want to know whether the couple was drunk and what kind of kiss the woman gave the man. The students tend to argue about the details, but ultimately, they realize that good communication could have averted the problem."

After completing a 26-hour training program, members of the outreach team pair up to visit the university's nine residences, as well as local elementary and high schools. Last year, they spoke to nearly 2,000 students. This year, they're also scheduled to do workshops at each of the university's sorority and fraternity houses.

The SACOMS definition of sexual assault is a broad one, including any unwanted act of a sexual nature. "It can be verbal, emotional as well as physical assault," said Heese.

Brooke Thorndyraft, 20, a member of the outreach team, recalled that at her Washington State high school, inappropriate sexual teasing was common. "You'd be surprised. It happens at a lot of high schools," she said.

Rather than advising young women to stay home at night or to dress modestly, members of the outreach team (known among themselves as "outreachers") deliver what they believe is a more relevant message. They want to raise young people's awareness of societal attitudes that might contribute to sexual assault

The first stereotype outreachers are determined to dispel is that sexual assaults are committed by

strangers. "We need to get rid of our focus on the man jumping out from the bushes," Heese said. In fact, about 80 per cent of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows. "That means friends, relatives and co-workers," Heese said. Date or acquaintance rape is the most common form of physical sexual assault - as well as the least likely to be reported.

During their hour-long workshops, which they offer free of charge, SACOMS members discuss the influence of gender stereotypes. They point out that the traditional female is supposed to be passive and put others' feelings before her own; the traditional male is expected to be aggressive and forward. "Males are supposed to go after what they want. They're seen as aggressors; women are the gatekeepers," Heese said. They believe that these stereotypes are directly related to sexual assault.

SACOMSS members stress that clear communication between partners can help prevent date rape. Yet Heese acknowledged that even in today's world, it's still difficult for young women to openly discuss sex. "It's still considered wrong, or unacceptable, for a woman to say, 'I like that' or 'I want this.' In our society, a woman who's forward about sex and who's comfortable with her sexuality can be wrongly branded a 'slut,' whereas a man earns the title of 'stud'," she said.

Of the 30 members team, 12 are men. "It's important for both men and women to realize that sexual assault isn't just a women's issue. It's a societal issue," Hertzman said.

Teens tend to respond well to the SACOMSS outreach program. Many are reluctant to discuss sexual issues with their parents, preferring to open up to their peers. "In their relationships with their parents, teens are still adolescents. They're at an age where they need to take distance from their parents," said Francine Duquet, professor of sexology at the Universite du Quebec a Montreal.

Teachers are generally barred from the workshops. SACOMSS members believe this strategy helps students feel comfortable discussing sex. "The teacher is an authority figure who has an ongoing relationship with the students. We want to come in as peers. We're students, too," said Paul Ruel, 23, a member of the outreach team.

In addition to offering workshops, SACOMSS runs support groups for male and female survivors of child-hood sexual abuse and sexual assault as adults. For listening, referral and support services, or to arrange for a SACOMSS outreach team to visit your school or community group, call (514) 398-2700 weekdays, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. The TTY number (for the hearing impaired) is (514) 398-1091.

The Montreal Sexual Assault Centre operates a 24-hour bilingual help line. Call (514) 934-4504.

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