

Dispelling myths about sexual assault

April 25, 2007

When the strobe lights and disco balls light up South Lake Tahoe clubs at night, the dance floors begin to fill. As men and women leave their seats to move to the music, their drinks sit unattended on tables.

Most people don't give these abandoned beverages a second thought, but someone may be waiting and watching for the opportunity mix in a narcotic and take advantage of the unsuspecting dancer who returns to their table to take a drink.

Even though South Lake Tahoe is a small town and perceived as relatively safe, sexual assaults still happen, said Lisa Utzig, outreach coordinator for the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center. Keeping a close eye on a drink can prevent a person from becoming the victim of a sexual assault.

Nine cases of felony sexual assaults were prosecuted by the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office in 2006 in South Lake Tahoe. Seven of those cases resulted in conviction, William Clark, chief assistant district attorney for El Dorado County, said.

To help raise awareness about sexual assault in the community, the Women's Center is holding a fundraiser on Wednesday at Chevys for Denim Day.

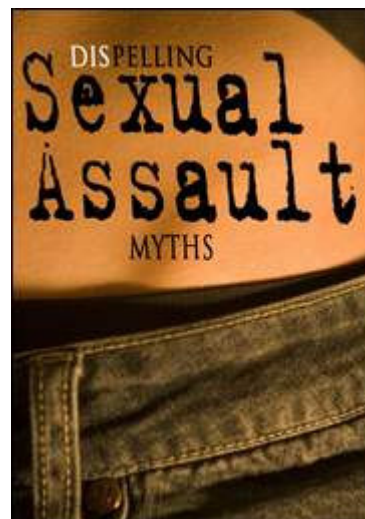
Denim Day is an international awareness effort started in 1999 in conjunction with Sexual Assault Awareness Month as a protest of an Italian Supreme Court decision to overturn a rape conviction. The Italian Supreme Court dismissed charges against a rape suspect, arguing that "because the victim wore very, very tight jeans, she had to help him remove them ... and by removing the jeans ... it was no longer rape but consensual sex."

Dispelling myths and educating people about sexual assault is important because victims need to know that it's not their fault if someone commits a crime against them, Utzig said.

"Going out at two in the morning and getting wasted at the bar may not be the healthiest decision, but it's still not your fault if someone commits a crime against you," Utzig said. "It's not a crime to go to the bar. It's not a crime to get wasted. It's not a crime to dress sexy. Those are rights that you have. The crime is when someone crosses that line and forces you to do something you don't want to do."

Many different acts constitute sexual assault, ranging from inappropriate touching to sexual harassment, forced sexual acts or rape. Utzig said although most people think of females as the victims of sexual assault, there are many cases in which the victim is male.

Jonah M. Kessel /
Tahoe Daily Tribune /
Today marks Denim
Day, a day
remembered by
thousands on a global
scale. Denim Day is
an international
awareness effort that
started in 1999 as a
protest of an Italian
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rape conviction.



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Leanne Wagoner, executive director of the Women's Center, said some victims are reluctant to come forward because they don't remember the incident. She said people



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Drinks should always be in your hand when at bars. Never leave your drink unattended. (Photo Illustration by Dan Thrift and Michelle Morton)

who have been drugged or who have been drinking heavily may not know what happened, but they know something is wrong. If a person passes out and someone has sex with them, Wagoner said that's rape because the victim couldn't consent. She said in these cases it's imperative for the victim to have a medical examination done before showering or changing clothes. If not, crucial DNA evidence could be lost.

"There's a million reasons why people don't come forward right away, but the longer you wait the more evidence is lost," Wagoner said. "If you ever feel like you've been sexually assaulted, it's important to tell someone and seek help immediately."

The staff at the Women's Center is trained to provide victims of sexual assault with the information and resources they need to decide whether or not to report the assault. Wagoner said the center is a safe place where victims can talk with an advocate confidentially. The staff is not required to report sexual assaults that don't involve minors.

"We lay out the options and the decision is in the client's hands," Wagoner said. "If they decide to report it, then a lot of times there needs to be a medical exam done and we can go with them anytime day or night."

When a report is made, the Women's Center works with a Sexual Assault Response Team made up of representatives from the District Attorney's Office, the South Lake Tahoe Police Department, the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department, Barton

Memorial Hospital and court appointed special advocates. The team works together to reduce trauma by limiting the number of times the victim has to relate the details of the assault.

Utzig said many victims don't report incidents of sexual assault because they blame themselves and feel they played a role in what happened to them. But she said victims shouldn't question themselves.

"They think, 'I guess I shouldn't have been out that late.' Or 'I guess I did lead him on because we were making out,'" Utzig said. "But you don't owe anybody anything and at any point you have the right to stop and say no."

-- By Michelle Morton, MMorton@TahoeDailyTribune.com

What is Denim Day?

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What can you do?

Wear jeans on Denim Day, Wednesday, to protest the myths and excuses surrounding sexual assault, such as:

* "She was asking for it."

- * "She was wearing sexy clothes."
- * "She was dancing sexy."
- * "She was in his room at 2 a.m."
- * Remember: There is no excuse for rape.

How you can help?

- * Chevys Fundraiser for South Lake Tahoe Women's Center on Wednesday from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., Chevys Fresh Mex Restaurant, 3678 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe
- * 25 percent of the profits go to the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center

Where to go for help

www.sltwc.org

The South Lake Tahoe Women's Center is located at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe, 96150
(530) 544-2118

South Lake Tahoe by the numbers

Stats for graph (convictions include guilty or no contest pleas)

2002 there were 11 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

2003 there were 11 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

2004 there were 06 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

2005 there were 07 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

2006 there were 10 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

2007 there were 00 sexual felony assaults reported in South Lake Tahoe

Source: South Lake Tahoe Police Department