News




The Portiuncula Chapel on the campus of Franciscan University of Steubenville (Rosanna Nicolai/Wikimedia Creative Commons)



by Jenn Morson

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Franciscan University of Steubenville, nestled in the hills of northeast Ohio, is an institution with a reputation for traditional Catholic piety. It is a place where charismatic prayer is frequently invoked, the Rosary recited, and course descriptions across all subject areas commit to what the school describes as dynamic Catholic orthodoxy.

This year, the school's administration has made a public commitment to stop sexual violence and harassment on campus.

At the opening of the school year Mass in August, Franciscan Fr. Sean Sheridan, university president, pledged a transparent and vigorous approach. In a letter to alumni and students, he encouraged victims to come forward and acknowledged the obligation of the university to investigate all claims. A law firm, Husch Blackwell LLP, was hired by the school to review the university's records of past abuse investigations. A report is due by January, with Sheridan stating it will be shared with the university's board of trustees and, possibly, the wider public.

But some Franciscan students need convincing.

Liza*, about to begin her junior year at Franciscan, said reporting sexual assault and harassment on campus was a traumatic and damaging ordeal for her.

In her freshman year, she began dating John*, a fellow freshman and her first boyfriend. She described him as aggressive and controlling. "The first time John kissed me, he was forceful, and he grabbed my butt as well," Liza said. "I told him I was uncomfortable, but it kept getting worse from there."

Liza said that John sexually assaulted her on more than one occasion. "He would force me to do sexual things that I didn't want to do," she said. John would take Liza's bra off without her consent, took photos of her, sent her explicit texts and eventually pressured her into performing oral sex.

Liza didn't want to continue the relationship, but when she would attempt to break it off, he threatened suicide. He also threatened to tell her friends and family sexually

explicit details about their relationship.

"He would get violent with me. If we were driving off-campus, he would drive very fast to scare me and lock the doors so I couldn't get out," she said. He once threw a bottle of Tylenol at her face.

When she returned home at the end of freshman year, her parents convinced her to break off the relationship. John did not return to Franciscan the following school year, but Liza had to block him on her phone, email and social media.

The following school year, Liza met Frank*, a student who was also a teacher in self-defense classes.

"When Frank taught me self-defense classes, he would always find a way to pin me down and be on top of me," Liza said. "I would feel his erection. It weirded me out, and I felt gross, but I thought maybe guys were just supposed to do that."

Liza said she had no interest in a romantic relationship with Frank. But he pursued her. Liza recalled Frank grabbing her hand, forcing it into his lap whenever she was around him. He also made her uncomfortable by sharing his sexual fantasies and fetishes with her.

Around that time, Liza began dating her boyfriend, Sam, who encouraged her to report these incidents to Student Life.

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She met with Catherine Heck, assistant vice president of student life, who offered her what is described as a "no contact order," stating that she and the accused would not cross paths on campus. That evening, Sam helped Liza write 10 pages of notes detailing her experiences, which they both brought to the next meeting with Heck.

The couple's next meeting was with Heck and John Pizzuti, director of campus safety and compliance. "The entire demeanor changed with a man in the room," Liza said. "Suddenly I was taken seriously."

At this meeting, Liza said that Pizzuti offered three options: informal complaint, formal complaint or to do nothing. During the course of the discussion, she was

discouraged from contacting law enforcement.

Pizzuti told them that in Ohio the law allows prosecution of sexual assailants without the victim's consent. "He said anything you report to the police could be used against us, and that we wouldn't be able to back out, that we might cause someone to go to jail, and we felt too much pressure in that," Sam said.

Liza was required to attend multiple meetings with Heck and Pizzuti throughout the end of the academic year as well as mandatory counseling sessions.

"Cathy Heck told me that I needed to go to a counselor so they would be sure I wasn't bipolar. She said that was necessary to be taken seriously," Liza said.

She attended the counseling sessions, for which she was charged $10. The counselor told Liza that she didn't object loudly enough during her assault.

Her case involving Frank was concluded Aug. 20 with a decision that neither Frank nor Liza were at fault. The no-contact order remains in place. The case involving John is ongoing.

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In the fall of 2017, Karen* arrived at Franciscan University as a 17-year-old. "I came to Franciscan because I grew up in a traditional family and wanted an environment to thrive as well as explore my faith," Karen said.

At a party off-campus with some friends, Karen had too much to drink. "I was feeling sick, so I went upstairs to one of the bedrooms to lie down," she said. "A guy I didn't know followed me upstairs and got into bed next to me."

She said she was on the verge of passing out when the young man started kissing her. Without permission, he pulled off her shirt and put his hands in her pants. She kept pushing at him, and eventually someone walked in and startled him. She went into the alley behind the house where he followed her and again took off her shirt before she finally passed out. Friends eventually found her and brought her back to campus.

Although Karen's friends encouraged her to tell the school what had transpired, she was reluctant. But Heck found out, and Karen was told to meet with her the following Tuesday.

When Karen went to the meeting, she said Heck told her that she was sorry this had happened and that the school could help. But Karen said Heck did not sound supportive. She was told she was attending too many parties and that she was a threat to the school. Heck handed her a pamphlet about sexual assault.

At a follow-up meeting with Heck and Pizzuti, Karen was offered a no-contact order, but she declined. "It's a really small school," she said, "And I would have to change my entire life around him, scheduling my classes, my meals, everything. I felt it would make healing difficult."

Since Karen had been underage drinking, Heck sent a letter to her parents reporting her infraction as well as requiring Karen to attend counseling.

Karen argued that it violated Title IX as well as the university's own amnesty policy for her to be punished for drinking since it was discovered in the course of the investigation. Heck eventually rescinded the counseling requirement. To Karen's knowledge, the young man she reported was not disciplined in any way for his underage drinking or anything else.

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Much like Karen, Maureen* grew up in a strong, Catholic family as an active member of her parish. She saw Franciscan as a place to continue her spiritual growth and education. In the fall of 2013, the beginning of her sophomore year, she was excited to meet a new student, James*, a body builder who had transferred from a seminary.

James was handsome and charming, and Maureen felt flattered that he was interested in her.

That September, on his birthday, Maureen gave James a small gift and spent time with him at a celebration with friends. When it was too late for men and women to be in the same dorm, James suggested they go on a walk across campus and pray the rosary.

During their walk, Maureen says James shared personal details from his life, and eventually they settled on a hill in front of a dormitory close to the friary. He began to kiss her.

"I eventually gave in to the kissing, but then he pinned my arms above my head and my legs," Maureen said. "So I shouted, 'Stop! You're hurting me!' but he just laughed." Next, James bit Maureen on the neck, aggressively, and kneed her in the

crotch. He tried to stick his hands down the front of her pants, but when he couldn't, he reached down the back of them.

Maureen remembered that campus security guards walked by them twice, but she was too stunned to scream. "I just started praying to St. Michael for strength, please, give me the strength to push this guy off of me," she said.

Eventually, Maureen's story made its way to Heck through a resident adviser and resident director. Heck insisted Maureen compose a statement. After she dictated her eight page, single-spaced account to her resident director, Maureen was brought before Heck multiple times. She was told by Heck that her account didn't meet the description of sexual assault.

During one of the interviews, Heck asked Maureen if she had orgasmed during her assault. Heck told her, Maureen later recalled, that "if you orgasmed, that meant you were enjoying it and that wouldn't be defined as sexual assault."

James was not allowed to come within 300 yards of Maureen, and she was required to attend counseling. "Cathy Heck followed up with the counselor to make sure I was going, and I was told I wasn't allowed to speak about this to anybody," Maureen said. "She also said to me, 'You don't want to go to the police, do you?' which made it sound very unfavorable and scary to me."

Both alumni and current students told NCR similar stories.

Joseph Dantona and his wife, Savannah, Franciscan graduates, said when they were enrolled at Steubenville a student touched her in an unwelcome manner and physically threatened the two of them.

They protested, but the university insisted it was a matter for spiritual counseling and did nothing.

Nicholas DeGregory, another Franciscan University graduate, worked for three years in resident life in one of only two dorms that house men and women (the men and women live on separate wings).

"I was involved in at least a dozen cases where a victim claimed sexual harassment or assault," DeGregory said.

Sometimes, he said, legal requirements were ignored in favor of religious language invoked to deal with issues of assault and harassment.

"I once handled a case involving a male student stalking, verbally abusing, and finally forcing himself on a female student because he thought it was 'God's Will.' And the most terrifying thing was that members of the administration told the victim that the problem was being remedied through 'spiritual counseling' of the aggressor,' " he said.

That was not the only time that spiritual counseling was prescribed. "Three other times I witnessed cases of potential sexual harassment/assault/rape 'resolved' through 'spiritual counseling' of the aggressor and nothing else," DeGregory said. "No suspensions. No expulsions. And when I asked why nothing was being done, I would get the same answer: 'We are Catholic, so we hate the sin but love the sinner.' "

When Heck and Pizzuti were contacted by NCR for the opportunity to respond to these accounts, individual answers were not provided. Instead the university officially responded that, “Franciscan University of Steubenville is committed to providing a safe and positive learning environment for every student. The University is always looking for ways to better serve our students. At the top of this list is providing counseling when traumatic events occur. As it has in the past, the Wellness Center will offer a support group for Victims of Sexual Assault.”

**Names have been changed for this story.*

[Jenn Morson, a Franciscan University of Steubenville graduate, is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.]

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