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Understanding rape can help prevent it

Rape is a topic that makes everyone uncomfortable. Living in a beautiful community like Flagstaff it is hard to envision that sexual assault happens here but it does, and like all violent crimes, it is something we should talk about and take steps to address. Understanding the dynamics of sexual violence can help us as a community and as individuals to develop strategies to prevent rape.

The stereotypical rapist is the masked stranger who lurks behind bushes and grabs victims in the night, or the prowler sneaking into bedroom windows wielding weapons. While these types of stranger assaults occur they are extremely rare.

The majority of sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim already knows, or just met. Acquaintance, or "date" rape constitutes the majority of the cases we see at NACASA. In fact of the 48 cases we have dealt with so far in 2008 44 victims indicated they had some level of existing relationship with their attacker prior to the assault. How do these assaults occur? Often the perpetrator is someone that was just met at a bar or a

party. Regardless of the circumstances of how or where the assault occurs, if a person is coerced or physically forced to have sex against their will it is rape.

Rapists often rely on the use of alcohol and other drugs to lower inhibitions and increase the vulnerability of their victims. They will spike a victim's drink when they aren't looking with additional alcohol or other drugs that impair judgment and memory. An initially charming and fun evening can quickly

turn into a nightmare. Victims in these circumstances are left terrified, confused and racked with guilt. Self-blame is a very common response not helped by societal questioning of victim behaviors. However, it is the rapist who made the choice to break the law and it is the rapist society should be questioning.

It is not unsafe to go out in Flagstaff. But we all need to be aware that these types of assaults occur in our town and we can take steps to prevent it from happening to us.

■ Don't go out alone when you plan to drink. Take a friend with you and agree ahead of time to look out for one another.

If it appears that someone is intentionally trying to get your friend drunk stay with her. Have a signal designated ahead of time that it is time to go. Never let someone you just met take you or a friend home. Call a cab.

■ Don't accept drinks handed to you from someone you just met. Order drinks yourself and accept them directly from the bartender or waitress. If you leave your drink alone for any period of time — don't drink it.

Programs like NACASA are available to assist sexual assault victims. Rape is the most under reported violent crime in the United States. At NACASA we are working to create an environment that is safe for victims to come forward to receive the support and care they need. If it happened to you, you are not alone. Reach out, there is a support system that can help.

Jessica Pope oversees the Northern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault at North Country HealthCare. NACASA is a sexual assault response program that offers medical forensic examinations for rape victims, as well as follow-up health care, counseling and referrals. NACASA can be reached at (928) 213-6112

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