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Speaking Out

After finding her passion in gender issues at IWU, Molly McLay '06 confronts the problem of sexual assault on one of America's biggest campuses.

Story by **KIM HILL**

In a YouTube parody of a song from the Disney animated film *Frozen*, Molly McLay '06 asks incoming University of Illinois undergraduates one simple question: “Do you want to go to FYCARE?” The perpetually positive McLay uses the singing talents and creative energy she cultivated at IWU to gently open the door to a serious topic — campus sexual assault.

At Illinois' Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) campus, McLay works to prevent campus sexual violence as the assistant director of the Women's Resources Center. A licensed clinical social worker, McLay oversees a program entitled First Year Campus Acquaintance Rape Education (FYCARE). The program includes workshops that all first-year UIUC students (more than 8,000 in a given year) are required to take their first semester. Student facilitators run the workshops; McLay teaches the facilitators to recognize societal issues surrounding campus sexual



In an online video, McLay uses music and humor to explain the purpose of FYCARE. All UIUC students (more than 8,000 in a given year) are required to take FYCARE workshops their first semester

assault while empowering them with tools to tackle the problem. Workshop topics include discussions defining consent and coercion, effects of sexual assault on a survivor, how to support survivors, how students can challenge attitudes that directly or indirectly perpetuate rape, and the role of drugs and alcohol in sexual violence.

On its website, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) notes that sexual assault is among the most underreported of crimes, but that “researchers have been unable to determine the precise incidence of sexual assault on American campuses” because of variances in the wording and context of surveys. Nonetheless, according to the

NIJ report, “several studies indicate that a substantial proportion of female students — between 18 and 20 percent — experience rape or some other form of sexual assault during their college years.” McLay points out that students of all genders can be affected. As one example, a 2007 Campus Sexual Assault Study funded by the Department of Justice reported that 1 in 16 men experience an actual or attempted sexual assault at some point during their undergraduate years.

Pivotal moments

McLay’s work on the forefront of sexual assault prevention emerged slowly at IWU and beyond. Entering college intent on becoming a math teacher and writing poetry in her spare time, she realized calculus didn’t satisfy her creative streak and changed her major to English-writing in hopes of teaching high school English. McLay found herself gravitating to women’s issues whenever she needed a topic for a paper. Seeking to understand why, she took McFee Professor of Religion Carole Myscowski’s course “Introduction to Women’s Studies,” which McLay calls “life-changing.”

It was in women’s studies courses that McLay began to understand the dynamics of gender roles, which she first perceived during the awkwardness of junior high. Those roles didn’t seem to change much, McLay observed, as people matured.

“Even when I was young, I saw how smart girls silenced themselves to be the kind of girl a boy wants to date, instead of the kind of girls they wanted to be,” she recalls. “I didn’t recognize what that was then, but in women’s studies courses I began to understand why that happens.



McLay (shown above at the University of Illinois’ Urbana-Champaign campus) says that women’s studies courses at Illinois Wesleyan influenced her eventual career choices.

“It really empowered me to want to empower other women, so they didn’t feel like they had to silence any part of themselves.”

McLay added a women’s studies major to her course load, yet still struggled to find a career path. A field trip during a May Term “Human Sexuality” course turned out to be a defining moment.

“We went to the Bloomington office of Planned Parenthood,” McLay recalls, “and the woman who worked there, Shireen Schrock [now a staffer in IWU’s Grants Office], did the most engaging presentation on birth control. I vividly remember wondering, ‘How do you get a job like that?’ So I decided to stay after everyone else filed out of the room and just ask her.”

The encounter led to an internship at Planned Parenthood. It was there that McLay first worked with peer educators and discovered how students could effectively bond with each other, and with her, over topics that could be uncomfortable to discuss yet were critically important.

After graduating, McLay pursued educational publishing for a few years until deciding to become a therapist who uses the act of writing to help patients work through past traumas. That decision did not come easily, and McLay reached out to several IWU mentors, including Associate Professor of English Wes Chapman, to help her find her way.

“He was instrumental in helping me comb through all of these different possibilities to reach the core of who I really am and what I really wanted to do,” McLay says of Chapman.

Entering a social work graduate program at UIUC, McLay did a graduate assistantship at the campus health center, where she educated students on birth control, sexually transmitted diseases and healthy relationships. In this role, she again worked with students who taught workshops on these issues to peers.

In an internship at the Prairie Center Against Sexual Assault in Springfield, McLay counseled child and adult survivors of sexual assault and abuse. She also provided medical advocacy and support to survivors directly following their trauma and helped guide them through their interactions with hospital personnel and law enforcement.

“Sitting with people at the hospital as they deal with one of the hardest things they’ll ever go through is truly a humbling experience,” says McLay.

She also discovered why social workers and therapists can burn out so quickly. “It’s one horrible story after another,” McLay says of the advocacy work at rape crisis centers. Inspired by the idea of working to prevent assaults from occurring, McLay joined the staff of the University of Illinois Women’s Resources Center in January 2013 after earning a master’s degree in social work in 2011.

“The work I do now [at UIUC] is largely about prevention, but I still offer counseling to [student] survivors, and I continue to volunteer for the rape crisis center in Champaign.”

Turning students into advocates

That she first rejected a career in teaching and now finds herself relishing her experiences as an educator is an irony not lost on McLay.

“I think the timing wasn’t right for me to become a teacher immediately after graduating from IWU,” she says. “When I first started, I was absolutely terrified. But over time, I realized I do have certain gifts I bring to the classroom, and I wouldn’t have noticed these gifts if I hadn’t become a social worker first. My empathy, openness and positivity were realized in my work as a social worker, and that comes through in my teaching.”

McLay has deliberately designed her FYCARE courses on what she calls “the IWU brand of instructor-student relationships.” At large universities such as Illinois, “big” can equate to “anonymous.” Indeed, McLay’s classes typically enroll 40 to 60 students — larger than any she took in high school, college or even in graduate school. Her IWU experience in a collaborative classroom environment, where students are valued as important contributors, is the same environment she seeks to create and nurture at UIUC.

“I credit so many of those professors I had at IWU for fostering relationships with me that I could build on beyond IWU, that could sustain me as I figured things out, and that I can reach out to now to celebrate my successes,” she says. “This same type of relationship is something I have found I’m skillful at, probably thanks to seeing it modeled so well by my professors” — people like Chapman, Associate Professor of History April Schultz, Professor of English Dan Terkla, and associate professors of English Mike Theune and Mary Ann Bushman.

McLay says mentoring relationships such as those she experienced throughout her time at IWU are even more important when the topic is sexual violence and social justice. “I want students to put themselves into the conversation and have the material apply to their own lives,” says McLay, who has been named each semester to the UIUC List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent. “Students then become advocates.”

Experts cite student buy-in as critical in efforts to end campus sexual assault. In order for cultures to change at colleges, administrators must first understand the culture from the perspective of those who live in it — the students. Culture change takes time, and it has to happen from within, McLay notes. One way is to open



McLay and Associate Dean of Students Darcy Greder gave a session on supporting campus sexual assault survivors at the 2015 Council for IWU Women Summit.

dialogue about what it means to give and receive consent in sexual situations. Higher education officials across the nation and at IWU ([link to related story](#)) are now talking often, openly and powerfully about consent.

Another critical component is to give students the tools they need to apply their new knowledge in their lives. McLay and her colleagues at UIUC have developed a new workshop, scheduled for widespread release in 2015-16, focused solely on bystander intervention. Utilizing the same successful format with peers as leaders, the new training will teach students how to watch out for each other at a party or bar and what to do when a situation appears headed in a wrong direction.

The new bystander training mirrors FYCARE's origins — with a small, core group of students leading it with high hopes for success — much the way the FYCARE program began some 20 years ago.

Changing the mindset can feel like an uphill battle amidst campus cultures where victim-blaming is still practiced and where the word “rape” is casually applied to everything from video games to exams (i.e., “I totally raped that test.”).

Still, McLay insists, profound changes can happen when a student simply decides to speak out. She relates how one student facilitator was shopping at a big-box store with her family. In reference to a competitor, the salesperson said “They’re totally raping you,” and encouraged the student’s family to instead purchase the salesperson’s product. Incensed, the student challenged the salesperson for the ill-advised reference and then reported the remark to the store manager.

“Speaking out like that took a lot of courage,” says McLay. “Hearing a story like that from someone who was inspired and equipped with what she learned in our classes — that gives me a glimmer of hope.”

To read about Illinois Wesleyan's community approach in dealing with sexual assault, [go here.](#)