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Young women willing to take responsibility



SUSAN REIMER

I WROTE A COLUMN LAST MONTH, IN the wake of the acquittal of Naval Academy Midshipman Lamar Owens on rape charges, saying that any young woman who knowingly drinks herself to the point of blacking out bears some responsibility for what happens next, be it an auto accident or sexual assault.

I wrote that the verdict was a warning to all college-aged women that society is unlikely to consider them a victim if they deliberately drank themselves stupid.

"It is not that a man is free to have sex with a woman who is too drunk to object. It is not that a woman who gets blind drunk deserves to be raped," I wrote. "It is that a woman who gets blind drunk is that much more likely to be raped, or to have her purse stolen or to step off a curb and sprain her ankle.

"If she knows that and gets blind drunk anyway, what are we to say to her? Can she expect to be consoled as the victim? The verdict in this case suggests not, and I do not fault that verdict," I wrote.

The response to that column was powerful — [Please see REIMER, 2D]

Young women see a need for taking more personal responsibility

REIMER (From Page 1D)

and surprising.

I expected to be criticized by rape victims and rape counselors for being insensitive, and I was.

I expected to be told that I knew nothing about the life at the Naval Academy, and I was.

What I did not expect were the dozens of e-mails I received from young women — and their parents — who agreed with me that a new level of personal responsibility was required of young women in a culture where both alcohol and sex now flow so freely.

I had thought I was out on a very preachy limb when I wrote: "If you don't want to wake up in the middle of a nightmare, don't drink yourself into oblivion."

Instead, it appeared from the e-mails I received that I was repeating conversations that were going on in households all over the place.

"The direction of these conversations with regards to girls and sex is that empowerment and liberation and self-confidence do not mean there are no risks," said Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

"IT IS A VERY UNSENTIMENTAL ... LOOK AT BEHAVIOR."
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She is also the mother of three daughters, and I consider her one of my mentors in the business of raising girls.

"People still have to be prudent and careful and sensible."

I had been surprised at the number of e-mails I received from young women telling me that the accuser in the Owens case was just plain careless and should have known better.

Sarah Brown was not surprised. It is the same kind of response teens have when they learn that a friend is pregnant, she said.

"It is a very unsentimental, rather cold-eyed look at behavior," she said. "But it is very common for them to say, 'They knew what would happen and they did it anyway. They made their bed, now they can sleep in it.'

"Teens are more willing to talk about the role of personal responsibility than are the adults around them," she said.

"It doesn't seem too much to ask that there be a personal ethic. The adults in the room need to say out loud, 'You ought not to get drunk and have sex with someone you don't know.'"

Barbara Defoe Whitehead, the sociologist who has written so brilliantly about marriage and the dynamics between men and women, is baffled by the fact that, in a time when women have so many more opportunities and privileges, "they could also be so stupid."

"Didn't the struggle for women's rights carry this parallel lesson in responsibility?" she asked.

"Having passed these good laws on sexual harassment and punishment for date rape, there is this other side that individuals have to do the best they can to not to make themselves more vulnerable."

As others have observed about the Owens case, this was less about sex than it was about alcohol.

Two bright, capable young people who, by virtue of their admission to the Naval Academy, had demonstrated that they possess

the best qualities, get drunk — Owens testified that he had been drinking, too — and, because they are drunk, do things that devastate their lives.

"We've made progress in getting young people to be a little wiser about sex," said Whitehead. "But if you put alcohol into the mix, all bets are off."

This is not about good girls and bad boys anymore.

Research shows that teens of both sexes begin drinking and initiate sex at about the same age. It is also clear that pejoratives don't attach to her behavior the way they once did.

It is less and less the case that he is a stud and she is a slut; that he is a good-time, party guy and she is a lush.

A new single standard has replaced the old double standard, but, as Whitehead said, "We have to make sure the single sex standard is sane."

In this changing culture, with the fading paternalism that, to some extent, once kept young women safe, it is incumbent on them to be more vigilant — not less.

Said Brown: "It can't be about externals anymore."

"You have to have an internal compass that helps you gauge the risks around you."

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