

My child, how can I protect you?



Carly Cram Photography: Tree Fingers Carly Cram Photography

This piece was submitted by a local woman who signed the petition to remove the Rolf Harris mural from the Lighthouse Theatre in Warrnambool. I have kept her name anonymous, but want to thank her for her courage.

Last month I had a dream about Donald Trump. In this dream we were deep in conversation at a crowded function and I was trying to impress him with my intelligence. Mid-conversation, however, he leant across and grabbed me on the breast.

In shock, I pulled away and started shouting 'he grabbed my breast, he grabbed my breast'. Expecting the room to react with outrage, my calls were instead met with deathly silence, before everyone returned to what they were doing.

Business as usual.

I burst into tears and was led outside by my best friend and confidante where, with such weary sadness, I cried 'I'm just so tired of fighting.'

This dream encapsulated a lot for me. It summed up my lifelong battle with sexual assault and abuse. From fighting off men at the pub, to keeping secrets hidden for 15 years. From being told 'you shouldn't have let him do that to you', to my fight with PTSD, depression and anxiety. From the heartbreaking story of a friend who held her secret for another 20 years after being told she was 'making it up', to the deafening silence that followed after I screamed at a man at a crowded market for following me and relentlessly pinching my bum.

Two things had just happened around the time of my Trump dream. The #metoo campaign had gathered steam, and while I was interested and a little excited, I was largely cynical and reluctant to take part.

I wasn't convinced that putting myself out there and making myself vulnerable was going to change anything. After all, we have known for a long time now that **one third of all girls will be sexually assaulted by the time they are eighteen, but what steps have we made to address this?** What difference would this campaign make? And why should abused women have to lead the charge?

Around the same time, my eight year-old daughter was sexually assaulted. An older man on the street reached out and grabbed her on the vagina, right in front of me. He seemed to see her as some kind of sexual delight, and not as our gorgeous, creative and intelligent kid who embraced life with all her kind heart.

My heart broke for my daughter that day, and I still don't know if it will ever fully heal. While I knew the statistics, I still believed I held a powerful weapon with my past

experience and knowledge of sexual assault. I wanted so much to believe that my passion for protecting her from what I had to endure would be enough to get her through. If I educated her well, if I gave it to her straight and didn't hush it up or try to gloss over it, she would get through life unscathed.

It turns out I couldn't even get her to double figures.

The harsh reality of the pervasiveness of sexual assault this time brought me to my knees. In quiet moments to myself I sobbed so hard I didn't think I would ever stop. The injustice of growing up a female suddenly became very real, and very personal.

It was my response to the incident that plagued me afterwards. Because how did I respond? With silence.

I walked her calmly away and did not confront this man for fear of making it worse for my daughter. And in the days to come it dawned on me that this is what we have done as women. We have stayed silent, to keep the peace, for the families sake, for the community's sake, to make it in a man's world.

And in turn, silence has been internalised as some totem of virtue or stoicism in women. The more silent a woman in her pain, the stronger she is. Instead of voicing our outrage, we have used all our collective energy to heal the victims, to sit with them through their confusion, sadness and pain.

But while we have stayed silent, we have left a gaping hole in the ability to challenge men for their behaviour, or to challenge them to be leaders in the change we so desperately need.

Eventually it was a counsellor who helped me to see the tiny speck of positive in our experience. Carrying all the guilt in the world on my shoulders, she allowed me to see that the response we gave our daughter after her sexual assault could be vital in her recovery.

Immediately after it happened I took her to a safe place, gave her a big cuddle and told her that it was nothing about her, or her behaviour, that made him do that. I told her that it was his sick behaviour that was the problem, and that unfortunately stuff like that just happens sometimes, but that she will be ok.

I also told her that we were here for her any time she needed us. The psychologist assured me that our past history of openly communicating with our daughter since she was born, like talking about the hard stuff when it came up, and never letting silence linger, would ensure she knew she could approach us at any time.

Her words also reinforced what I had learnt from the fabulous Professor Caroline Taylor, who has spent years researching and working with children who had been through the court system for sexual abuse and assault.

While only a **tiny three percent of cases ever make it to conviction**, she found that the process, regardless of the outcome, could be a cathartic one for young people as long as they felt supported and that their story was heard by someone, be it a police officer, lawyer, or family member.

Indeed, the power of hearing a person's story and sharing their pain can never be underestimated. As a telephone counsellor, I cannot count the times people have said they just need someone to hear their pain, not solve their problems.

So while we chip away at a society that has allowed men too much privilege for too long, and while many of us will be faced with the cold hard fact that we cannot always protect our children no matter how hard we try, perhaps we can take a little comfort in knowing that responding to an abused child with listening, support and unconditional love can be hugely powerful, even if it is at the wrong and sad end of the sexual

assault spectrum.

Despite our incredibly painful experience, I am still increasingly hopeful for the future. I do feel a change in the air.

Since the #me too campaign, another sexual predator in Don Burke has been outed, and now allegations against Donald Trump are finally being taken seriously.

I have hope that our daughters will live and flourish in a time where a sexual predator who thinks that 'grabbing women on the pussy' is part and parcel of money and fame is not elected by men and women as the leader of the most powerful country on earth.

We need to keep reinforcing to women and girls that speaking up and speaking out is brave, and that silent stoicism, while once a coping technique, is no longer necessary.

And we need to meet this bravery with corresponding support and outrage. I have hope that if ever my daughter was to dream about being outraged by her sexual assault, the whole function room would stand up and shout 'ME TOO'.