

How Women Warn: Disillusioned with law enforcement, women seek informal methods of recourse



Janelle C had had enough. The local woman said she was a victim of a violent physical assault in January 2015 by her best friend's boyfriend. Janelle's friend remained with the boyfriend until he allegedly committed a life-threatening assault against her. Janelle's friend actually took the rare step of pressing charges, and, according to Janelle, the boyfriend was convicted of felony assault with a deadly weapon. The story should have ended there — the system worked. But instead, that was just the beginning.

Although the offender's probation expressly prohibited him from being in bars, Janelle routinely saw him in such establishments. Concerned that alcohol consumption might exacerbate his anger issues and heighten the risk to other women, Janelle said she routinely called the police to tell them that he was violating his probation, but law enforcement agencies were unresponsive. Then Janelle heard that this man was working in a local bar and potentially posed a threat to other women she knew. What was to be done?

Our country is at a reckoning point. The #MeToo movement has brought conversations regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault to the forefront of American consciousness, and by extension, we're forced to grapple with the ways in which sexism and misogyny permeate American life. Almost a year into the #MeToo movement, however, victims of harassment and assault still face sharp barriers to coming forward. From apathy and disbelief to increased threats to physical safety, the consequences of bringing these types of traumatic experiences to light can be severe. This is to say nothing of the perceived ineffectiveness of pursuing these kinds of allegations through legal channels. There is a constant push and pull between women (primarily) who now feel empowered to make their personal stories of abuse and mistreatment heard, and those who are inclined to disbelieve any such public allegations. Despite the tide of public opinion seemingly turning toward support for victims, women who do make the decision to come forward are all too often greeted with reactions ranging from scorn and derision at best, to abuse, trolling and even death threats at worst.

This all is occurring against the backdrop of a legal system that seems ill-equipped to appropriately handle cases of sexual assault or domestic abuse. A 2014 study published in the journal *Psychology of Violence* showed that even when victims of domestic abuse come forward and report their assaults to the police, "less than 2% of offenders ever receive jail time." This is to say nothing of the threats to personal safety victims face from their abusers if they choose to speak out.

It's no wonder, then, that women often resort to using informal channels and networks to keep themselves and their friends safe. It's not at all uncommon for women to warn each other to "stay away from that guy" or "don't go to that place" because the guy or the place in question has a reputation for being unsafe. But now, through social media and other modern modes of communication and networking, women and those who are female-identifying are finding new ways to check in and keep each other safe.

There are secret Facebook groups used by women and femmes to share their experiences in a safe and private environment. Some industrious Twitter users have posted "help me" guides to alert concerned bystanders to the types of body language women and femmes use to indicate that they feel unsafe. And public Facebook posts are often used to share stories of trauma and warn women of potentially dangerous men.

This, in the end, was Janelle's chosen method for speaking out. Compelled to act by a desire to protect women from a potentially dangerous offender, on September 20 she posted a detailed account of her experience with her friend's ex-boyfriend. She named him publicly with the intent of exposing his well-documented history of violence to their mutual friends. The response to the post was overwhelming and positive. It was shared 30 times, and Janelle reports receiving several direct messages from other women who've had a similar experience with this man.

Word eventually got around to Daniel Becker, the owner of the establishment where the man worked. Daniel immediately reached out to Janelle to see how he could be of help. "It was gut wrenching to read [the post]," he said. Daniel and Janelle both expressed a desire for this individual to be able to access some kind of help or rehabilitation, but neither were sure how receptive he'd be. Now that Daniel was aware of the assault conviction and the apparent pattern of behavior, he faced a difficult choice: Fire this employee on the spot, in which case he might just go to the next bar for work and continue to be a threat to patrons and staff; or give him a clearly defined path toward rehabilitation that would also address the safety of coworkers. The man was not receptive to that proposal, so he was fired. Daniel also indicated that he would be in touch with other bar owners around the state to try to keep this man out of the bar industry. Of his decision, Daniel said that it was, "the right decision for myself, my business, my staff, and everyone else in this city."

Ultimately Janelle's decision to post about the man was successful, though she expressed some trepidation that the man could attempt to harm her at some point in the future. But in her words, "What we really need are more male allies ... to speak up. To share our stories. To push people like this out of their lives and to chastise them. Men need to hold more men accountable. We're out here feeling pretty f**king alone."