

A watercolor illustration featuring a large, dark grey shadow of a person on the left side of the page. To the right, a smaller, more vibrant figure is depicted in shades of purple, orange, and blue. The background is white with scattered watercolor splatters in various colors, including grey, black, orange, and purple. The overall style is artistic and expressive.

COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Incidents of violence on campus are being reported, and that's a good thing ... Mount Royal professor calls for transparent and stricter survivor-focused protocols regarding campus violence in Canada

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Mandy Stobo is the visual artist who created the *bad portrait project*, celebrating our self-worth by making our flaws our beauty and helping make art accessible



nly a generation ago, it would have been unheard of in the post-secondary sector to be encouraged by the number of reported incidents of relationship and sexual violence on a university campus, let alone publicize them.

Well, in a Dylan-esque way, “the times, they are a changin.”

A 2014 CBC News story shared an exclusive investigation that collected data from 87 universities and major colleges exposing myriad inconsistencies in reporting and data collection that brought to light the alarmingly low rate of reported incidents of sexual violence on Canadian campuses.

The reality is that the number of students who experience violence, both on- and off-campus, stands as a black eye for post-secondary institutions across the country — recorded or not. The National College Health Assessment (NCHA), an internationally recognized student survey, which collects precise data about student health, habits, behaviours and perceptions, indicated that approximately one in three Mount Royal students had experienced some kind of violence in one or multiple relationships.

“That’s a staggering number,” says Gaye Warthe, PhD, chair of the Department of Child Studies and Social Work, who has done much research in the area. She adds, however, that Mount Royal needs to know these stats in order to allocate resources accordingly.

In 2008 and 2010, Warthe and her co-researcher, Leslie Tutty of the University of Calgary, began taking a look at Mount Royal’s dating violence rates. They were saddened to find that about a third of students had experienced some kind of abuse, either before or after enrolling at Mount Royal. However, it’s not all bad — Warthe explains that higher numbers of reported cases point to something, well, positive — schools with “staggeringly” high reported cases underscore the need to provide an environment where students feel safe to come forward and report incidents of violence.

“It means we can combat the problem by working towards a cultural change — work towards keeping people safer — because we have a barometer of what we’re dealing with as a university,” she says.

Studies on dating violence in post-secondary began in the early

’80s. In the U.S., colleges and universities have had mandatory reporting policies for sexual violence since 1972, when Title IX was introduced, a federal law requiring gender equity and protecting students from harassment and bullying based on sex. Since 2013, these same schools have been required to report on dating, domestic, sexual violence and stalking, and hate crimes.

According to Warthe, who is also a registered social worker, it’s time Canada followed suit.

“Title IX came into effect in the U.S. in the ’70s, then in 1990 the Clery Act focused on mandatory sexual violence reporting and prevention. In 2013 the act was expanded with reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and the definition now includes

all of the above mentioned,” explains Warthe. “For Canadian campuses to go backwards by reporting only sexual violence, not all relationship violence, seems ludicrous.”

Mounting public pressure over the past few years has marked a major milestone in terms of a broad and long-sought change across the post-secondary sector in Canada, says Warthe. Her work at Mount

Royal has had the unwavering focus of ringing in this new era — in the city and across the province.

The CBC report publicly highlighted the lack of policy on sexual violence, but more importantly, the lack of protocols for responding to disclosures of all types of relationship violence (emotional, physical, sexual, stalking) and addressing safety.

“The fact is that it’s happening, and we know it’s happening,” Warthe says. “But, without accurate and reliable data we’re working blindly to create prevention strategies.

“The protocols for handling disclosures are paramount to creating a culture in post-secondary that encourages students to seek help when they need it, and that’s what we’re working to develop and share with other post-secondary institutions.”

Warthe has been involved in developing protocols for screening for domestic violence in over 64 agencies in Calgary, including emergency departments and schools. She also helped develop protocols for the specialized domestic violence court.

When she started working at Mount Royal full time in 2005, she and colleagues Patricia Kostorous, PhD, faculty member in the Bachelor of Child Studies and Cathy Carter-Snell, PhD,

One in three Mount Royal students had experienced some kind of violence in one, or multiple relationships.

— The National College Health Assessment student survey



Gaye Warthe

Chair, Department of Child Studies
and Social Work

faculty member in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, recognized that post-secondary was behind the rest of the community in developing a survivor-centred response to relationship violence.

“As a social worker, I felt an obligation to address that gap,” she says.

Warthe’s work of late coincides with Mount Royal’s Diversity and Human Rights services, and Campus Security’s work toward innovative protocols for responding to disclosures. An imperative step in the right direction is making sure that students have the tools and resources available to feel they can safely come forward. Mount Royal has several groups helping to lead the charge. Peter Davison, formerly of the Calgary Police Service (CPS) and now Mount Royal’s manager of Security Services, started his career in law enforcement in 1981 before accruing 27 years of experience while climbing the ranks to Deputy Chief of CPS. Yet, of all of his accomplishments on the force, Davison speaks most proudly of his leading role in establishing the CPS’s domestic conflict unit and specialized domestic violence court.

“That model has grown into one of the most successful and complimented programs in North America,” he says.

Davison is looking to bring that experience to the table when talking about procedures for handling disclosures of relationship and sexual violence on campus.

As momentum continues to build around these grassroots initiatives, “We’re using what we learn to help to define our direction and combat the issues as a campus,” says Warthe. “And through this approach, Mount Royal can continue to be a leader in Alberta and contribute our findings to influence larger change in the sector.

“The key to an effective approach is recognition that violence prevention is about community change. We cannot focus only on one type of abuse, such as sexual violence, and ignore other types of violence that occur in dating and domestic relationships. Nor can Mount Royal develop policies for one group of people on campus. We cannot ignore that MRU employees, as well as students, are experiencing violence in relationships and increasing safety in our community means creating protocols for responding to disclosures of abuse and campus policies for students and employees.”

There is big change afoot institutionally

At a grassroots level, the winds of change have been blowing through campus for years as several initiatives have sprouted, driving progress

“Stepping Up puts MRU on the map for leading the charge on addressing an issue that way too many students are familiar with.”

— Simone Foster, BN
Peer Facilitator, Stepping Up

■ DIVERSITY AND MEANINGFUL INCLUSION FRAMEWORK

Institutionally, in late 2015, Mount Royal made strides for a safer campus for all with the final iteration of the Diversity and Meaningful Inclusion Strategic Framework. The framework creates a systemic approach for creating meaningfully inclusive practices, programs and services.

“Students of diverse genders and sexualities are vital to the fabric of our campus community. Our human rights policy protects sexual identity and gender expression,” says Stephanie Stone, director and advisor, Diversity and Human Rights, who helped to develop the framework. “We are committed to maintaining an inclusive learning environment that supports sexual and gender diversity.”

■ STEPPING UP

Based on the information collected in the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) (2008, 2010 and 2013) on the experiences of students at MRU, Warthe, Kostouros, Carter-Snell and Tutty developed and implemented Stepping Up, a peer-facilitated prevention project aimed at curbing dating, domestic and sexual violence.

Funded by the Alberta Government Ministry of Human Services, Stepping Up was piloted in 2010 and 2011, and the most recent iteration is currently underway. The program focuses on supporting students to develop healthy relationships through recognizing unhealthy and abusive behaviours; the importance of consent in relationships; understanding how to intervene as a bystander; and the role of media in understanding gender and relationships. The project curriculum is designed and delivered by peers with the support of the faculty research team and community partners.

“Since its beginning, I have personally witnessed its impact as a facilitator, student and now alumna,” says Simone Foster, a recent nursing graduate working with the Stepping Up project.

“I have had students (male and female) come up to me, curious as to what it is and how they can get involved. Many students want to learn how to recognize relationship violence, what they can do to intervene and how to educate their fellow peers on safe relationships.

“Stepping Up puts MRU on the map for leading the charge on addressing an issue that way too many students are familiar with.”

Faculty from MacEwan University and the University of Lethbridge, along with 60 Mount Royal students and community partners, attended the prevention weekend in January 2016.





■ WHO'S FRANK?

Frank, the anti-bullying pink elephant, fights the good fight on our campus. Let's be Frank (and the Frank mascot) is an anti-bullying movement conceived by a group of Mount Royal faculty and students in partnership with students and counsellors from a neighbouring high school. The movement, started in 2014, has been gaining momentum ever since.

Frank's initiatives are marked by an annual day of solidarity against bullying with campus members proudly sporting pink, followed by Frankly Speaking ... About Sexual Violence, a panel discussion with experts from Mount Royal, the Student Association of Mount Royal University and Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse on topics ranging from who is being sexually assaulted, to the male perspective, and bystander intervention.

“The real difference we are seeing is the decreased negative connotations about being a victim, and normalizing conversation around abuse.”

— Danielle Hammond

Residence Advisor, Mount Royal University

■ STAFF TO SUPPORT SURVIVORS

In January 2016, Mount Royal created the full-time position of Sexual Violence Response and Awareness Co-ordinator to enhance the supports for survivors and help formal processes around disclosures. Cari Ionson is the first person to hold this important new role.

Having worked for agencies on the frontlines of sexual violence prevention such as the Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse (CCASA), Ionson brings a wealth of first-hand experience to the job. In explaining her career move to post-secondary education, she presents a powerful parable of creating large-scale social change.

“The story starts at the bottom of a waterfall,” she said. “People are falling off the waterfall and they're getting hurt and maimed. It's a horrific scene.

“Some people are there to pick the bodies out of the pool. But, I've always been compelled to go to the top of the waterfall to figure out what the heck is going on up there. Why are people falling off this waterfall?”

Ionson believes in a client-centred and trauma-informed approach that recognizes the widespread responses to sexual violence. She is currently working with advocates on campus, who are staff members trained to support those who come forward with disclosures.

Mount Royal is now a satellite site CCASA, a sexual abuse and sexual assault crisis and education service provider for Calgary and surrounding areas. As of 2016, a counsellor from CCASA comes to campus once a week to offer specialized counselling services for people impacted by sexual violence.

“We are building Mount Royal's capacity to support people who have experienced sexual violence,” Ionson says. “People must feel empowered to come forward with disclosures to allow us to support them in the best possible way.”

■ #IBELIEVEYOU

In summer 2015, Mount Royal supported the Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Services (AASAS) in kicking-off the collaborative #IBelieveYou campaign, a month-long public awareness effort focusing on educating and empowering a proactive community of front-line sexual assault responders, both on and off campuses.

Danielle Hammond, Mount Royal Residence Advisor (RA), says the #IBelieveYou campaign gave her and her fellow residence advisors a means to start the conversation with students living on campus and decrease the stigma around being a victim of abuse.

“As a result of the campaign, many of the RAs have noticed their students feeling confident in approaching them about abuse issues in their lives,” says Hammond. “The real difference we are seeing is the decreased negative connotations about being a victim, and normalizing conversation around abuse.”

The #IBelieveYou campaign is considered a vital step in both educating people on how to best respond to disclosures, as well as cultivating safe environments on campus where victims feel comfortable to come forward.

“Mount Royal University was the first post-secondary approached to support the #IBelieveYou campaign. The immediately enthusiastic and positive response received from MRU students, faculty and staff was what provided the impetus for us to go forward and engage the support of every post-secondary in Alberta,” says Deb Tomlinson, chief executive officer at AASAS.

Through Leger Research, AASAS polled 1001 Albertans before and after the campaign to find that the number of respondents who knew how to appropriately respond to a disclosure had increased by 100 per cent over the course of the month-long push. ♡