*Audrie & Daisy* Film Review

By: Madi Merritt

Trigger warning: contains sexual assault and suicide



*Audrie and Daisy* is a tragic and beautifully painful story of two young and vibrant girls who were sexually assaulted in the year 2012.

Detective Joseph Merritt, a cold-case sexual assault investigator for the nationally recognized Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI), calls the film “accurate, real and heartbreaking.” He expresses how watching this film from his unique point of view was horrible. He says, “It’s easier for me to deal with cases I can do something about…” and, “...to see the atrocities that occurred and then to see those who are there to protect people whether it be the police or prosecutors, who had an opportunity to make those things right, fall flat and do nothing is shocking on the conscience.”

The first event the film describes is the assault of Audrie Pott who lived in California. She attended Saratoga High School. On September 2nd, 2012 she and a friend decided to attend a party at a friend's house in Saratoga during Labor Day weekend.

Audrie, among many others, was drinking alcohol. Audrie became unconscious. She was later carried to the upper level of the home by a classmate whose identity was concealed during the documentary. The one boy then grew into a group of boys. The boys then began to draw all over her body in her most intimate parts, while she was unconscious.

The drawing then escalated to her sexual assault by two of the participants where they penetrated her with a marker. As well as her assault, the group then took pictures of Audrie unconscious with the hateful markings left by the boys all over her body, [then shared them with other acquaintances](https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/sexting-shame-and-suicide-72148/).

Over the next eight days, Audrie endured a horrifying amount of bullying from her classmates. In an online correspondence between her and a classmate named Joe she said, [“I now have a reputation I can never get rid of”](https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/sexting-shame-and-suicide-72148/).

This tragic timeline of events led young, beautiful and promising Audrie to take her own life eight days after her assault.

Victims and survivors often describe the bullying and shaming from their family, peers or society in general, as equal to or worse than the initial assault. This thought process on society's behalf is called victim blaming. Victim blaming is exactly what it sounds like, [victim blaming is the attitude which suggests that the victim rather than the perpetrator bears responsibility for the assault](https://orgs.law.harvard.edu/halt/how-to-avoid-victim-blaming/). Examples of victim blaming would be, “why were you wearing that type of outfit?” or “why did you have that much to drink?” or “why were you out that late?”

This toxic response shames victims into silence for fear of ridicule and the fear that people won't believe them. This culture and old way of thinking then creates an environment that covers up and normalizes sexual misconduct from one case to the massive and tragic cases involving Larry Nassar, Jeffery Epstein and Harvey Weinstein.

This culture is called rape culture. Rape culture is a term coined in the 1970s designed to show the ways in which society blames victims of sexual assault and normalizes male sexual violence. It allows us to live in a society where it is acceptable to teach sexualized violence prevention as “don’t get raped” instead of “don’t rape.” (<https://www.brandonu.ca/sexualviolence/education-prevention/rape-culture/>)

The next event the film presents is the experience of 14-year-old Daisy Coleman and her friend Paige Parkhurst. The story takes place in the small town of Maryville, Missouri. The pair of teenage girls snuck through a basement window to meet with a group of high school boys on January 8, 2012. The group of under-aged teens then began drinking at an alarming rate.

In the film Daisy describes a designated cup filled with some sort of alcohol called the “bitch-cup.” She describes the boys essentially using this cup as a way to challenge her to drink more.

Daisy and her friend were then separated into different rooms and sexually assaulted. Paige by a 15-year-old boy and Daisy by a 17-year-old boy. During the time of Daisy’s assault a revolting bystander decided to film the rape with his cell phone.

The boys then decided they were done with the girls. They proceeded to get the girls back to Daisy’s home where they left Daisy and Paige, [outside her home in sub-freezing temperatures when she “was incapable of protecting or caring for herself” in the words of the prosecution](https://time.com/368/a-cold-end-to-maryville-sexual-assault-case/).

Daisy’s mother found the girls outside, half-frozen and unconscious. She described them as not being able to speak or move. In the film she also describes her attempts to run warm baths for the girls to warm them up where she then noticed an alarming redness near and on Daisy’s intimate areas.

Daisy’s mother took her to the hospital and had a rape kit done along with other tests.

Daisy had no recollection of the events that led up to her waking up frozen in her front yard.

After outlining the case, the film introduces the elected sheriff of Nodaway County, Darren White, who was a part of investigating the case. Words that would describe the sheriff when interviewing Detective Merritt were, uneducated, ignorant and self-serving to name a few.

As the film introduces us to Sheriff White, he describes his position as sheriff in 22 disturbingly arrogant words for someone plucked by the hand of democracy to protect and serve the people. He says “You know, not to sound like a Harry Truman cliché, but the buck really does stop here. There’s nobody above the sheriff.”

In the words of the sheriff, with the information given by the girls, we were able to “...round them up and bring them in.” The film then cuts to the real interview of Matthew Barnett, the 17-year-old who sexually assaulted Daisy.

Detective Merritt, who has conducted over 5,000 suspect interviews throughout his time in law enforcement, trained federally, and by multiple state facilitated trainings in almost every way to interview a suspect, describes the interviewing strategies on behalf of the interviewer of Barnett as, “not very good.”

After being arrested and arraigned, the charges against the boys were dropped by the prosecution for lack of evidence. The documentary explains how Matthew Barnett’s grandfather was a well-known political official and laid undertones of a small-town cover up.

The revelation that Matthew’s family is generally well-known as well as politically connected is just one of many examples of how sexual assault cases become politicized and swept under the rug to protect the reputation of the offender and their family, rather than protecting the victims.

When describing the phone evidence and those who claim it exists or to have seen it, Sheriff Darren White says, “You know, without pointing fingers it serves to benefit people’s cause by making a lot of things up that didn't really happen and really doesn't exist, but don't underestimate the need for attention, especially young girls.” He might as well have just called Daisy out by name and called her an attention seeking liar.

Detective Merritt recounts Sheriff Darren White as one of the most revolting people, undeserving of a badge. He says, “I have one of those badges and I get to be a police officer to protect and serve people in my community, and it's probably the proudest thing I’ve ever achieved. To watch somebody have that same status and be in a position of absolute power, yet look at victims and survivors of sexual abuse the way he does truly disgusts me. He’s the scourge of law enforcement.”

The film then displays how the case and prosecution's decision to drop the charges against the boys sparked a national level of attention and a massive amount of coverage by the media including the national outlets of CNN, NBC, and Fox News.

The film includes a clip from Fox News during the height of the case's traction, of criminal defense attorney Joseph DiBenedetto saying, “But what did she expect to happen at one o’clock in the morning, after sneaking out?” Being out late, drinking alcohol, wearing a short skirt, being unconscious, and not being able to say no are not examples of consent. Those things do not give anyone permission to force themselves onto you as Mr. DiBenedetto so wrongly insinuated by saying, “But what did she expect to happen…”

Another example of this film doing an exceptional job of showcasing the outdated and sickening thought process that plagues much of society today regarding victims, survivors and even offenders.

Matthew Barnett pleaded guilty to endangering the welfare of a child in the second degree and was handed the punishment of two years probation. A slap on the wrist in comparison to what an offender who was actually held accountable would've received.

Daisy Coleman was re-victimized through systemic failures within the justice system.

Matthew Barnett is directly responsible for 23-year-old Daisy Coleman ending her pain and taking her own life on August 4th of 2020.

At the end of the film, a heart wrenching display of known victim and survivor names like Audrie and Daisy are shown, as well as the name Jane Doe, over and over as those names trail off into darkness. This symbolic display is shown to present how the list of victim and survivor names is ongoing and unknown, long and often forgotten.

The facts are, [1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime and 1 in 33 American men have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime](https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem).

Sexual Assault is one of the most under-reported crimes. Only 230 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police. [That means about 3 out of 4 go unreported](https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system#:~:text=The%20Majority%20of%20Sexual%20Assaults,out%20of%204%20go%20unreported).

This crime goes unreported so often because instead of treating sexual assault victims like victims of  any other crime, society treats them like they did something wrong. Instead of asking the offender about their decision making, society turns to victim blaming.

This vicious cycle is costing lives like Audrie Pott’s and Daisy Coleman’s. It’s our responsibility to end this cycle.

The film *Audrie and Daisy* takes steps to end the cycle by sharing Audrie and Daisy’s stories in order to educate people about the many mistakes made by law enforcement and society. The only way to end this cycle is to educate yourself and those around you.

Watch this film. Tell your friends to watch this film. Tell your family to watch this film. This film is moving, devastating and important for many people to see in order to understand how big of a problem this is in society today.

If you need help regarding sexual assault, call 800.656.HOPE (4673) to be connected with a trained staff member from a sexual assault service provider in your area. (When you call 800.656.HOPE (4673), you’ll be routed to a local RAINN affiliate organization based on the first six digits of your phone number. Cell phone callers have the option to enter the ZIP code of their current location to more accurately locate the nearest sexual assault service provider.)