

April is Sexual Assault Month

President Obama is the first U.S. President to declare April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. This declaration came in 2009.

Sexual assault prevention is a relatively new field of practice and study, emerging out of the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

In the early “Consciousness Raising” groups of the feminist movement, women started speaking about their experiences, everything from housework to domestic violence to workplace inequities to sexual assault. I used to call them “Tupperware Parties”, and I attended many in those years.

The first rape crisis centers were founded as a result of the efforts of these early feminist activists.

Many of the issues raised by feminist critics were later confirmed by research. Two key concepts emerged: (1) Rape and the fear of rape have an impact on every woman’s life, and that fear influences choice and restricts freedom; and (2) rapists are not necessarily pathological, but may be extending and exaggerating culturally supported gender role stereotypes. (Rainn.org.)

Since the 1970’s we can see that we have had significant successes:

- A rape survivor's sexual history cannot be used to discredit her in court.
- Acquaintance rape has gained greater visibility.
- Rape crisis centers are still standing.
- Laws continue to change in favor of survivors.
- The assumption of men's power over women has been challenged.
- Survivors have greater resources.
- Sexual assault rates have declined in recent years.

Yet for all these successes, the topic of sexual assault is still challenging on many levels.

In society at large, women are still blamed for the violence they suffer. It is still common for people to ask: "Why did she... wear that, say this, go there, drink that, etc." rather than "Why did he rape her? We still have news headlines that cause us to continue to discuss this topic both publicly and within our families.

We have barely begun to discuss this topic as it intersects with disability. As you know from my previous columns the sexual assault rate for persons with disabilities, male and female, is significantly higher than the general population.

I don't have the answers yet, but want you to know that DIG and its partners are working on this issue now and will continue to do so in the coming months. Stay tuned, Sharon