

The difficult road ahead

**By Sean Black
Communications Coordinator
ICASA**

It should be a celebration. The system worked. A victim went to police to report a rape. The police believed the victim. A person was arrested and will stand trial. The trial will determine his guilt or innocence. But somewhere along the line, reality reared its depressing head and the situation went south faster than birds on speed. It became about the mind-boggling rape myths, the supposed vindictiveness of women and what can go wrong for a victim who reports a crime.

And so as a nation watches, the sexual assault case of Kobe Bryant unfold and wonder if it can get any worse for a 19-year-old girl in Colorado.

The public discussion and media frenzy around the Bryant case trotted out all the myths about rape victims: What was she doing in his room that night? Why did she agree to any sexual contact? How can you say no after the slightest uttering of yes? Why would he need to rape her? Why didn't she go to the police immediately? She is just trying to extort money from him. She's just a woman.

It's ugly, and a new batch of mud is being prepared to go along with the court documents and TV crews. When this case goes to trial, there will be high-powered attorneys doing their Ivy League best to discredit the young victim. They will question everything she has ever done and invoke every stereotype about every rape victim. The State's Attorney will fire back with facts, photos and pleas for common sense and adherence to the law.

They will wage battle in a Colorado courtroom. And that will be the smallest venue for this battle.

This case is a national issue, a national water-cooler discussion on rape. It will go on for months. It will be the job of the sexual assault victim advocates and all those that care about victims to frame that discussion. To educate. To make believers out of the skeptics. To bring to light the world of rape victims. That is a job for all of us.

It will be one of the rare times when rape will be a topic of conversation at places besides crisis centers. There will be debate and there will be arguments. It will be up to us to provide the proper ammunition to change minds and attitudes because those water-cooler discussions, those discussions in high school locker rooms, those discussions at dinner tables with 12-year-old boys and 10-year-old girls, those discussions - and not how the case in Colorado ends - will be the determining factor in whether this case will push forward or hold back the anti-sexual assault movement.

The items to interject into discussions are many and we must use this teaching moment to educate about the reality of rape.

False rape allegations are rare.

Women are not conniving and vindictive when it comes to rape allegations. Women do not manipulate a situation by crying rape. They just don't.

A study in Portland, Ore., found that only 1.6% of rape allegations were unfounded, compared to 2.5% of stolen car reports.

Why would anyone want to cry rape? What would you gain? The negative backlash. The name calling. Having your character and credibility repeatedly questioned in public forums. Losing your privacy and becoming labeled as “the woman that cried raped.” It is a painful time and one that no person would wish to experience.

Added to the “false report” fingerprinting is the perception that women often extort athletes and entertainers by claiming rape. That Bryant is a superstar has made this a huge issue. But where are the examples? Who are these poor athletes? Where are these mean women? I, who catch all facets of the sports media and spent four years of my life reporting on high-profile athletics, haven’t heard about the rash of false rape cases rampaging through pro sports leagues.

Reporting to law enforcement

The furor over the victim reporting to the police is perplexing. Victims are often lambasted for not reporting to law enforcement, yet when a victim does report within 18 hours of the attack, it’s not soon enough for the critics.

And what has her reporting got her? A multitude of negative stories, her face on supermarket tabloids and the Internet, her name repeated over and over on national radio, her e-mail address a public dumping ground and her phone number in the hands of those who leave death threats.

All that venom and anger for reporting a crime. The victim did what we encourage victims to do, she told her experience to law enforcement. The local law enforcement and State’s Attorney gathered and evaluated the evidence and decided to press charges against Kobe Bryant. Now it is up to the court to weigh

evidence and come to a conclusion. The victim's privacy and credibility should not be annihilated by the court of public opinion while we wait for the justice system to do its job.

Privacy On the airwaves

Perhaps the worst outcome from the media frenzy about the case was the release of the victim's identity and contact information through the media. Naming victims causes secondary trauma. Because of a lapse by certain "media" outlets (Internet sites), the victim in the Bryant case has received numerous disparaging phone and e-mail messages. The victim has lost her privacy and her safety is in question.

A man in Iowa was arrested after leaving messages threatening to kill the victim because she went to the police. If the victim's name had been withheld, the vast majority of this harassment wouldn't have taken place.

Some media outlets argue that they release the names of all other crime victims, but being a victim of rape isn't like having your bike stolen.

Character and Credibility

While the victim's credibility has been put on a skewer and barbecued, Bryant's character hasn't been questioned. There have been multiple statements from Bryant's teammates and others about how this incident is out of Kobe's character, and they can't believe he would do this. However, Bryant is paid millions of dollars to physically dominate his opponent every night. He makes a living overpowering others. While this does not make him guilty, physically imposing his way is not out of character.

Also, what the public sees on television is only a glimpse into a person. The public doesn't know how he acts at home. It would seem that the long list of athletes that have been in trouble over the years would have ingrained that into the public conscience.

These are some of the answers that must be provided for the public's questions. We must use this time to educate, to persuade and to move forward.

Viewpoint is a quarterly opinion column appearing in Coalition Commentary. To submit material for Viewpoint, contact Sean Black at 217-753-4117.