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## An Exercise in Activism: A Counter Protester Speaks Out

BY BRENDON SPARKMAN on NOVEMBER 27, 2018 • ( 0 )

*This article is one half of our two part series on the recent YCT Kavanaugh protest on UT Austin's campus and its response. Check out the other article [here](#).*

In the eyes of many, the events that transpired on October 2 on The University of Texas' West Mall speaks volumes to the sheer power that such a controversial and tumultuous event like the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court can have on survivors of sexual assault. On that fall afternoon, UT's chapter of Young Conservatives of Texas (YCT) took to the West Mall to protest what they viewed as unsubstantiated claims of sexual assault leveled against Kavanaugh. Despite the fact that the rally was intended to facilitate "good-faith discussions on the topic," [according to YCT's chairman Saurabh Sharma](#), tensions were quickly elevated and a gathering of counter protesters quickly formed.

One such counter protester, Sara Ross, was first on the scene and described what she saw. "By the time I had got there, things were just insane," said Ross. "You could tell everyone was so fired up. People were screaming and the YCT people were getting very defensive."

Noting the absence of counter protestors and signs, Ross quickly made her own and returned to the scene, only for representatives from the Dean of Students to reprimand her immediately.

She remembers, "I saw that no one there had any counter-protesting signs, so I ran back to the SAC art room and made one real quick, came back, and that's when I went and stood up on the steps and the people there from the Dean of Students office told me I had to get down."

"That's not anything I had ever done before, I'm not a serial protester... so I got off the steps but kept holding my sign. After a couple minutes I thought 'If I'm just standing here they can't really do anything to me,' so I got back up and they told me I had to leave again. I said no. The Dean of Students people threatened to get campus police involved so they would make me leave. I said no. That's when a bunch of other people showed up with signs and we all stood behind YCT on the steps with our signs. Eventually YCT people started to trickle away."

As a survivor of sexual assault herself, Ross felt compelled to rush to the defense of those gathered to challenge the positions taken by YCT, especially after witnessing how those individuals were being affected as the rally went on.

"As I was sexually assaulted last semester, to see them holding up signs and saying things that so blatantly challenged the stories of people on campus who are survivors, you could tell walking up, there were people who were obviously very distressed," said Ross. "I remember seeing a girl who was crumpled on the ground crying. To see someone so affected by it, and know that it had hit her so hard, and she felt so attacked and unsafe is what made me want to go back."



Academic – ish.

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In Ross' mind, considering the inevitable reaction of campus students to such a controversial position, the rally was only fated to end the way that it did.

"When I think about Saurabh and the people at YCT, I don't think that they're evil people. I don't think they set out saying 'I want to make girls fall to the ground and cry because they're remembering their sexual assault as they're walking between classes.' I don't think that was their intent. But I do think that they did it for attention. I don't think they did it to have a good faith conversation. If they wanted to do that, they would have done it in a different form, at a different time, in a different venue. Just holding up a sign that says 'Kavanaugh is Innocent' and '#MeToo gone #TooFar' that's not you being open to discussion. That's you being hostile towards people."

And yet, for Ross, the biggest point of contention was not the rally itself, but the meeting hosted in Waggener Hall by YCT the following day to discuss the fallout of what had transpired.

"After the protest, I was still fired up and really angry about everything," Ross said. "I saw online that they were having a YCT general body meeting the next day. And I thought, 'Well I'm going to go and see what's going on.'"

Ross recalled that a large number of UTPD officers were present, both outside the building and within the meeting hall.

"After I had sat down, two women from the Dean's office immediately recognized me and they came over to me, and they basically tell me not to cause any trouble," said Ross. "My plan was to take my sign at the right time and sit silently on the stage while YCT held their meeting. As Saurabh and their guest speakers continued talking, I'm just getting more and more infuriated by what they were saying."

Already disheartened by YCT's apparent disregard for the wellbeing of survivors, Ross only grew more vexed as the meeting continued.

"At one point, they put up pictures of the counter protesters and started making fun of them," Ross said. "One of the things said was 'This individual was barely passable as a woman.' So I'm frustrated, to say the least, by what's going on. They're saying some really nasty things about the physical appearances of the counter protesters and also the emotional reaction that people had had the day before. To me, that was super insensitive, because the vast majority of people counter protesting were survivors like myself. For them to make fun of how deeply people had been affected by that was blatantly disrespectful. After a while, they had another guest speaker saying some really horrendous things as well."

And then the speaker made a rape joke — a comment that sent Ross into a rage.

"That's when I stood up and lost it," Ross said. "I monologued for about thirty seconds about how hurtful and disruptive and just all-around terrible their demonstration had been the day before. That's when I started toward the stage with my sign. At that point a woman from the Dean's office stands up with a written statement prepared because they were expecting something like this to happen. She starts reading off all this stuff about how I'm being warned, that I'm being disruptive. I sat on the stage regardless, and that's when the officers present took me out of the room. My account of that differs slightly from what the Dean's office says happened. They say I was given multiple warnings and that I was told that I couldn't get up on the stage, and that I was given multiple warnings once I was on the stage, and that I was told that I could stay if I sat in my desk, and that didn't happen. I was just told to leave."

Ross emerged emotionally distressed and says her perception of YCT was fundamentally changed.

"The rally was something that I thought they were doing for attention. But then after the meeting, I thought, 'They really don't give a sh\*t about survivors on campus, do they?'"

Ross was then reprimanded by the Dean's Office who considered her actions a violation of the University's institutional rules for disruptive behavior at a university-sanctioned event.

Our Instagram

“I want to know why I’m getting in trouble for being at a university-sanctioned event if the university isn’t going to take responsibility for the content of that event.”

No time was wasted in Ross’ attempts to confer with her peers and fellow survivors and discuss their own reactions to the rally.

“Maybe two or three days after all that had happened, I took some time to talk to other people who I knew were survivors about their coping mechanisms and how the rally had affected them. I found that a lot of people were feeling the same way I had, and that they felt very unsupported by the University and felt that the University wasn’t protecting their needs or mental health as students.”

Ross then took a moment to address survivors on campus en masse.

“I want them to know that there are people who believe them,” Ross said. “It feels like sometimes you go day to day and you feel like no one believes you, and you’re losing friends, and people you thought were going to be there for you are suddenly not. If you can push through those days, you’ll find that there is a really strong community of survivors and allies on campus who are really doing what they can and what we can to make this a safer place for everyone.”

In light of all that has transpired as a result of YCT’s rally, Ross had this to offer as advice on how the organization could better handle future protests.

“Firstly, I would want them to know that what happened at their meeting following the rally was not okay. Putting up pictures of counter protesters who are survivors and making fun of their physical appearances and of their trauma is unacceptable. Secondly, if they are genuinely looking to have a civil discussion, then a mass rally on West Mall holding signs that directly attack so many people’s means of survival like #MeToo is not the way to go. Lastly, they could probably find a lot more support in the student body if they didn’t radicalize themselves so much. When you look at a group called ‘Young Conservatives,’ it doesn’t seem like a group that would necessarily attack survivors on West Mall. There’s a lot more people on campus who identify as conservatives that wouldn’t even affiliate themselves with YCT because they know that they’ve essentially become a hate group. Maybe look for more ways to actually be conservatives.”

In the aftermath of the last several weeks, Ross feels that UT’s efforts in addressing on-campus survivors after such an emotionally shocking experience has been found wanting.

“I would say more than anything, I feel unsupported by the university,” said Ross. “As a student last year, coming into this year I had a lot of difficulties with my assault and mental health. I genuinely felt that UT was a place where I was safe, and where I had a home, and a place where the administration had my best interests at heart. I don’t feel that way anymore. UT feels like a very hostile environment to me.”

As such, Ross has met with many in UT’s administration to express her discontent. Yet Dean Lilly herself, arguably the most effective individual to bring attention to the issues at hand, seems reticent to meet with her directly.

“I wanted to go directly to the Dean of Students,” said Ross. “I emailed her secretary to meet during her office hours. She responded quickly and asked what I wanted to talk about so that she could schedule my meeting. I responded ‘YCT,’ and she emailed back to me and said ‘Dean Lilly isn’t available to meet with you.’”

The Dean eventually contacted Ross via phone call in the early morning hours. Ross expressed her desire to meet with Dean Soncia Reagins-Lilly in person, who stated she would follow up with Ross. Weeks later, the Dean has yet to do so.

Ross is currently in the process of appealing her sanctions for violating the University’s institutional rules, which include a reflection essay on why her actions were wrong.

“I’m not going to write that,” said Ross. “A lot of people have told me that I should just bang something out that I don’t mean and turn it in for the sake of being done, but on principle I’m not going to write that. That

meeting may not have gone the way I wanted it to, but I don't regret standing up and calling out somebody for making a rape joke. I think the Dean's office thinks I'm a problematic student and that they need to find a way to turn this into a teaching moment, something I can learn from. I'm not the one that needs to learn from this whole thing. There's things I could have done better but I genuinely feel that my head and my heart are in the right place with this. I'm not going to write an essay apologizing for that."

Though the worst seems to have passed, Ross is by no means planning to return quietly to the fold of student life.

"I plan to continue trying to meet with people in the administration. After my appeal is settled, I don't plan to let this go. I'm going to continue talking to people because this is really an issue that me and so many of my close friends are very personally connected to. I really believe what happened this past month was not right and I don't think UT should be let off the hook for it.

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