

PENN STATE: THE MOTHER OF ALL TEACHABLE MOMENTS FOR THE BYSTANDER APPROACH

By Jackson Katz

(PART 1 OF A 3-PART SERIES)

December 1, 2011

For those of us who have been advocating a bystander-focused approach to the prevention of sexual violence, the scandal rocking State College, Pennsylvania, might be the mother of all teachable moments. If what is being alleged is true, then all the necessary elements are present:

- Incidents of sexual abuse witnessed by people in a position to intervene who did not;
- Pressures on people (men) in various peer cultures to remain silent
- The failure of institutional leaders to act, resulting in disastrous consequences; and
- All of this taking place in one of the bastions of male power and privilege - the Penn State University football program, presided over for 46 years by one of the iconic patriarchs in American sports culture.

The "bystander approach" at its best has direct relevance to all of these elements. Understanding the dynamics of bystander behavior -- in this case especially in male sports culture -- helps to explain what allegedly happened at Penn State. But perhaps even more importantly, the bystander approach offers concrete ideas about how to reform institutional practices in order to prevent future tragedies.

First, it is necessary to provide some brief background about the bystander approach, and clarify what I mean by the term. In media discussions about Penn State, some experts have made reference to the social psychological literature about the "bystander effect," the societal phenomenon where people are reluctant to get involved in potentially dangerous situations on the streets and elsewhere. Unfortunately, this use of the term "bystander" is easily confused with the bystander approach to prevention.

The key difference, for the purpose of this discussion, is that "bystander" in the prevention field refers to anyone who plays some role in an act of harassment, abuse or violence -- but is neither the perpetrator nor the victim. They are someone who is present and thus potentially in position to discourage, prevent, or interrupt an incident. They are a member of a peer culture who has

relationships with others who might be perpetrators or victims, or perhaps vulnerable to becoming one. A bystander could also be a teacher, coach, military commander or campus administrator who is in a position to respond assertively to incidents once they've occurred -- or to initiate prevention programs before something bad happens.

It is important to note that when sexual assault prevention educators talk about bystanders, they typically mean people who know each other, such as friends, classmates, colleagues, or members of sports teams. The dynamics of bystander behavior - and the impediments to action - are very different when people know the perpetrator or victim, versus when they are strangers.

THE MVP PROGRAM

My colleagues and I co-founded the first bystander program in the gender violence prevention field in 1993, at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. We called it the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program.

The initial idea behind MVP was to train college male student-athletes to use their status in male peer culture to speak out about issues that historically had been considered "women's issues," such as rape, relationship abuse and sexual harassment. If young men with status and a kind of "manhood credibility" on college and high school campuses would break their silence and make it clear to their peers and younger boys that they would not accept or tolerate sexist or heterosexist beliefs and behaviors, it would open up space for young men beyond the insular sports culture similarly to raise their voices. MVP was based on the elementary premise in social justice education that members of dominant groups -- men, whites, heterosexuals - play an important role in efforts to challenge sexism, racism and homophobia.

In the second year, we developed a complementary model for working with female student-athletes, coaches, and administrators; since the mid-1990s MVP has been a mixed-gender program. It should be noted, however, that whether we're working with student-athletes, the general student population, coaches, teachers, or other professionals, the MVP model includes space for both single and mixed-gender sessions. It is also worth noting that in recent years a number of other bystander initiatives have been developed, each with their own philosophies and emphases. What follows focuses on the MVP model: what we have been doing -- and some of what we have learned -- in our work in college athletics for nearly two decades. Because the Penn State case underscores so emphatically the necessity of examining -- and transforming --

social norms within male-dominated institutions, for the purpose of this article I have chosen to highlight our work in the sub-culture of college male athletics.

For at least the past generation, male sports culture has too often been the site of gender violence scandals. But MVP did not originate in organized athletics because of the problems in that sub-culture. The impetus was more proactive and positive, and had to do with the potential leadership of successful male (and later, female) student-athletes and coaches who, because they are seen as exemplars of traditional masculine success, have an enhanced level of credibility with their male peers and with younger men. If one of the long-term goals of the anti-rape movement is to transform rape-supportive attitudes in mainstream U.S. culture, who better to catalyze this transformation than men who -- more than most -- help to define the mainstream?

To put it another way, sexual violence prevention initiatives that fail to engage men in the sports culture and other areas of cultural hegemony are often ignored by mainstream populations, and can easily be marginalized. Why stay on the margins and not go right for the center? As the Penn State debacle makes clear, sports culture provides an unparalleled platform from which to call attention to a range of societal problems --- and to catalyze efforts to change the social norms that often underlie them.

Nonetheless, because the MVP program originated in sports culture, and continues to use sports terminology in some of its curricular materials, it is sometimes mistakenly seen as a program designed exclusively for athletics. For the past 18 years we have trained tens of thousands of student-athletes, coaches and athletic administrators across the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic spectrum at hundreds of Division 1, 2 and 3 programs, and with professional sports organizations and teams in the NFL, CFL, NBA, WNBA, MLB, and NASCAR. But from the beginning, the strategic vision of MVP was to begin in athletics and then move into broader student and professional populations in colleges, high schools, middle schools and other institutions like the U.S. military - a process that continues to this day.

In the early days of MVP, we were looking to develop a pedagogical model that could provide critical information and refute common rape myths, but do so in a way that would, in the words of Futures Without Violence founder Esta Soler, "invite, not indict" men, and engage them in critical dialogue. We quickly realized that the "bystander" category offered a way to transcend the limitations of the perpetrator-victim binary, which up until that point had held sway in

conventional gender violence prevention theory and practice. In many educational programs developed in the 1970s and 1980s, women were regarded primarily as victims, potential victims, or empowered survivors, and men as perpetrators or potential perpetrators.

Among the many limitations of this narrow approach is that most men did not see themselves as potential perpetrators -- and as a result shut down in a way that precluded honest participation or critical dialogue. This is not about me, their thinking went, but about the kind of men - those men -- who need to be helped, or held accountable, for bad behavior toward women. But when men - and women - are positioned as friends, family members, teammates, classmates, colleagues and co-workers of women who are or might one day be abused, or men who are abusive or perhaps going down that path, then "bystander" represents a virtually universal category - and men can't as easily tune it out. At MVP, we understood that this offered a creative solution to one of the central challenges in gender violence prevention education: how to engage men without approaching them as potential rapists and batterers.

The short and long-term solution wasn't to "fix" individual men; it was to change social norms, especially but not exclusively within male peer cultures. The strategy we settled on was to encourage people to speak out in the face of abusive behavior before, during or after the fact, and thus contribute to a climate where sexist abuse was seen as uncool and unacceptable, and with men in particular, as a transgression against -- rather than an enactment of -- the social norms of masculinity.

We also wanted to address the relation between men's violence against women and men's violence against ... men. This was prompted by empathy with men as victims, but it was also strategic. Appeals to men's altruism are more likely to be successful when bolstered by appeals to self-interest. Men's self-interest in preventing gender violence includes men's concern for the women in their lives: their mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, girlfriends and friends.

But in MVP, we also talk about the abuse, harassment and violence that men experience - usually (but not always) at the hands of other men. The same cultural and socialization processes that produce men who are violent toward women also help to produce men who verbally, physically and sexually assault each other -- and sexually abuse boys. From the beginning, MVP has used real-life scenarios that address the role of the bystander in instances of male-on-male bullying, gay-bashing and other forms of abuse that are common in men's lives. The alleged 2002 assault

of a 10-year-old boy in a locker room shower by former Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky that was witnessed by then-graduate assistant Mike McQueary sounds like a scenario that could have come right out of our program's main teaching tool, the MVP Playbook.

PART 2 (OF A 3-PART SERIES):

**PENN STATE & THE BYSTANDER APPROACH: LAYING BARE THE DYNAMICS
IN MALE PEER CULTURE**

By Jackson Katz

December 8, 2011

To many people, one of the most astounding things about the Penn State scandal is that in at least two separate incidents, adult men allegedly witnessed another adult man sexually assaulting boys and yet did not intervene -- according to the Grand Jury report on one of the incidents -- or immediately report it to the police. How could they not have taken stronger action? How could athletic administrators and other university officials not have acted more forcefully and responsibly?

Much commentary about Penn State -- and to a certain extent, Syracuse University -- has included speculation that the silence of various individuals might have been due to their placing a greater priority on maintaining the good name and reputation of the university and its athletic program over the safety of children. Whether or not this theory of misplaced priorities holds true, it clearly merits further investigation by outside authorities -- and deep introspection on the part of Penn State partisans -- in the weeks and months ahead.

But the bystander passivity that has come under critical scrutiny in the Happy Valley is sadly very common in male peer culture - especially in cases of gender and sexual violence involving "one of the guys." To many people this seems perplexing. How could people not act, especially when the alleged abuse involves children? Many callers to sports talk radio programs in recent weeks have asserted that if they had observed or been told about what went down at Penn State,

they would have taken immediate, forceful action. Maybe so, but talk is cheap. It is easy from a distance to judge others' failure to act. But as someone who has led hundreds of interactive discussions with men on the topic of engaging bystanders in the prevention of sexual and domestic violence, I know it is more complicated than that.

In reality there is often a price men must be willing to pay for doing the right thing. For example, when it comes to men's mistreatment of women, men who speak out and confront or interrupt each other's abusive behavior run the risk of fostering resentment from other men, increasing tensions in their daily interpersonal relationships, or in some cases, even suffering violent reprisals. Or they have to contend with their peers questioning their "manhood," even their heterosexuality. The stress and anxiety this kind of disapproval produces can be as disturbing for a 45-year-old man as it is for a 15-year-old boy.

In a powerful college athletic program, fraternity or military organization a man who "drops a dime" on another man -- especially someone who is well-respected or critical to the group's image or success -- might be seen as being disloyal to the group itself. In groups that prize blind loyalty over other ethical considerations, acting on principle thus comes with a cost. Depending on the popularity of the alleged perpetrator, a man who breaks the informal code of silence runs the risk of committing social suicide.

Sometimes there are practical -- including financial -- considerations. This is particularly true if the active bystander has less social capital -- or institutional power -- than the perpetrator. Consider the case of a first-year student-athlete who is uncomfortable with the way a senior co-captain talks about women. Should he say something? Or a scholarship student-athlete who finds out that his coach is abusing his wife, but the same coach controls the student-athlete's playing time, or maybe even the status of his scholarship. Should the student-athlete confront the coach? Is it fair to expect low-level university employees or military members to challenge their bosses or superior officers when they face a realistic fear of being fired or losing out on a promotion? The answer might be "yes" to all these hypothetical situations, but let's not pretend these are easy decisions for anyone to make.

In fact, a big part of the reason for the reluctance of men in general -- and men in sports culture

in specific -- to speak out about men's violence against women is that it often takes a good deal of courage for a man to do so. In the Penn State case, as Daniel Mendelsohn pointed out in *The New York Times*, squeamishness about homosexuality also seems to have played an important role in both Mike McQueary's reaction to the rape he witnessed, and the kinds of euphemisms university officials initially used to describe the incident (e.g. "horsing around" in the showers.)

As the multiple failures to protect children at Penn State demonstrate, it is important for people to learn and practice techniques they can use to intervene effectively in potential sexual assaults and a variety of other social situations. But more than skill-building is required. People -- in this case especially, men -- need permission from each other to act, and reassurance that those who do intervene and interrupt abusive behavior will be respected, not rejected, for actually "stepping up to the plate." Men, as well as women, need the opportunity to talk about the dynamics of their relationships with their peers, and with those in authority. What are the pros and cons of this course of action, or that one? If I see something that makes me uncomfortable, what should I do? To whom can I turn for ideas or support? What have others done in similar circumstances?

The answers to these sorts of questions are not likely to be found in a PowerPoint presentation, or a briefing about applicable state law or university rules. To be sure, it is important for everyone to know their obligations under the law. The Penn State case has made clear that university regulations on sexual abuse reporting -- and state laws themselves -- need to be scrutinized and strengthened. But the key to the success of the bystander approach in sexual assault prevention education has as much to do with the process as the content.

The power of critical dialogue focused on the role of the bystander is that the dialogue itself is the vehicle for a shift in group norms around the acceptance and perpetuation of rape and battering-supportive attitudes and behaviors.

In the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Playbook, as in the Penn State case, all of the bystander scenarios depict situations where the bystander knows the perpetrator (or potential perpetrator) and/or the victim (or potential victim). The interactive discussion highlights the nature of the bystander's relationship with both parties, as well as the larger peer culture in which

they are all imbedded.

Understanding the specific dynamics of a given peer culture is crucial to understanding what factors can catalyze or impede responsible action. For example, one of the key differences in facilitating bystander education sessions with cohesive groups like teams, and with groups composed of people who don't know each other well, is that few ties bind the latter group. Unlike teams, they have no shared experience to fall back on, and no ongoing mechanism for accountability (to each other). Jeff O'Brien, long-time director of MVP-National, explains: "Individuals can conceivably go back to their peer groups and no one would ever know they participated in a [gender violence] training. With athletic teams or in the military, you have common goals and organizational values that change the dynamic in the room. With these groups you are always reinforcing the idea that they are responsible to each other - and for each other's behavior. Just by having this conversation together, members of a team or military unit agree that they need to address these issues, and that they have responsibilities as leaders, teammates, fellow marines, etc. There is power in the shared experience [of the discussion.] I remember once a team told us, after we visited with them the year before, that they couldn't always think of profound things to say or do, but they could always say, 'MVP!' in a teammate's ear and he would know to stop what he was doing. The shared experience triggered the memory for them, both as a team and as individuals."

In MVP sessions with athletic teams, we refer to "teammates" more often than "bystanders," although operationally the two words are closely related. Outside of the athletic context, a bystander -- in the best sense of the word -- has a responsibility to others because of their shared humanity, not because they play a sport together. But a team is comprised of people who not only have shared goals, but oftentimes friendships, and a special kind of camaraderie. In MVP we customize our language and try, whenever possible, to adapt the bystander concept to various institutional cultures.

In dialogues with athletes, we raise a number of questions specific to the kinds of relationships people have on teams and in the broader athletic subculture:

- Would you be more likely to intervene in this (potential acquaintance rape) scenario if your teammate was involved, rather than someone you knew casually? Why or why not?

What if the guy was a close friend, but not a teammate? Would there be any difference in your response?

- We also ask questions about the bystander's enlightened self-interest. For example, if a teammate is charged with a sexual assault or is arrested for a domestic violence incident, how does that affect the team's reputation and self-image? Isn't it in your self-interest as a member of the team to prevent these things from happening, if at all possible?
- In sessions with coaches and athletic administrators, we ask questions like: What responsibility do you have to the student-athletes to model behavior in your personal behavior, and in your peer relationships, that you expect the student-athletes to emulate?

PART 3 (OF A 3-PART SERIES):

MOVING BEYOND PENN STATE: BYSTANDER TRAINING AS LEADERSHIP TRAINING

By Jackson Katz

December 15, 2011

Bystander training can actually be understood as a kind of entry-level leadership training, because bystanders who assess a situation, consider their options, and take action are doing what leaders do. Near the beginning of extended Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) trainings, we do a simple exercise where participants are asked to define leadership. What qualities do good leaders possess? We write the answers on a flip chart, and use those definitions throughout the training to reinforce the idea that "empowered bystanders" who interrupt abusive behaviors are better described as "leaders."

This exercise is especially effective with groups -- such as sports teams and military units -- whose members are already invested in the idea of becoming leaders. Long-time MVP trainer Daryl Fort says he can often feel a palpable sense of relief in the air when men (and women) figure out that pressure on them to conform to stereotypical gender norms is sometimes in conflict with the ideas of leadership and courage to which they aspire. "It can be liberating for

them," he says, "when these contradictions are confronted and lifted in the group, freeing individuals to behave in ways they identify internally as more positive for the team/unit, as well as self-affirming. Sometimes participants will approach us after a relatively brief 90-minute session and say things like, 'We really needed to hear/talk about that as a team. Thank you.' "

Bystander training helps individual men think about how their actions or inactions -- even well-intentioned -- sometimes contribute to a cultural climate that encourages, or at the very least tolerates, relationship abuse, sexual assault, and the sexual abuse of children. But while individual bystanders play a critical role, most solutions to social problems of the magnitude of sexual violence have to be of a social and institutional nature. For example, there is no excuse for any college or university that has an athletic program NOT to have mandated sexual assault and relationship abuse prevention education for all student-athletes, coaches and athletic administrators. If a college or university does not have this kind of programming -- and hundreds do not -- it represents a failure of leadership at the level of the athletic director or university administration.

Sexual assault prevention education should be part of the student-athlete experience -- for men and women -- from the first moment a young student-athlete steps onto campus. It should also be part of routine professional training required of coaches and athletic administrators. From the beginning of MVP we have insisted that athletic staffs need bystander training as much as the student-athletes. They need the opportunity to think through their responsibilities as leaders and mentors, but also their responsibilities as members of their own peer cultures. Too often, powerful coaches and administrators skip their part in the trainings. If asked, they typically say it's the students who really "need to hear the message," as if men and women in their thirties, forties, fifties and older in powerful leadership roles have all of this figured out, and have better things to do than to learn -- and engage in dialogue -- about how to notice and interrupt rape and abuse-supportive attitudes and behaviors.

As the Penn State situation clearly demonstrates, it is time for a shift in our expectations about the role of campus leaders -- university officials, athletic administrators, and coaches. Even before Penn State there had already been movement underway on the risk-management side of things. Now campus officials are even more concerned about their legal liabilities in sexual

assault cases, and new federal regulations and Title IX investigations are prompting schools to make sure their policies and procedures are comprehensive and up-to-date.

But aside from any legal requirements, athletic directors who do not offer or require prevention programs, and participate in them themselves, are in a sense being passive bystanders who are complicit in sexually abusive behaviors. This same logic about institutional responsibility in higher education applies to administrators in charge of Greek affairs, housing, health services, and other college and university systems. The best possible outcome of the sad events at Penn State and Syracuse University will be for institutions to see that taking a proactive approach to sexual assault and abuse prevention is infinitely preferable to picking up the pieces once the damage has been done.

END OF 3-PART SERIES

Jackson Katz, Ph.D., is an educator, author, filmmaker, and cultural theorist. He is the author of *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*, and creator of the film *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*. He has lectured on thousands of college and high school campuses and has conducted hundreds of professional trainings, seminars, and workshops in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia. He is co-founder of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, the leading gender violence prevention initiative in college and professional athletics.

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This 3-part series was originally published on the National Sexual Violence Resource Center web site, nsvrc.org.