Voices Rising

As the nation’s colleges struggle to confront sexual violence, Emory students have taken the lead in standing up to "one of the greatest social justice and public health issues of our time"

Story by Kimber Williams; portraits by Kay Hinton/Emory Magazine

Students and staff participate in Denim Day. (See box below.)

When Simone Wilson 14C arrived at Emory four years ago, she remembers the topic of sexual assault prevention coming up somewhere amid the tsunami of information that washed over her during new student orientation.

No, it's not casual Friday.

On Wednesday, April 23, 2014, the Emory campus was a sea of denim. It was the second annual Denim Day, a project of Emory’s Respect Program, which strives to engage the community to prevent and respond to sexual assault and relationship violence. Denim Day stems from a 1992 Italian court case in which a rapist’s conviction was overturned. Because the survivor was wearing jeans, the judge reasoned that she must have helped the rapist remove them, deeming the act consensual. The day is now part of an international effort to show support for sexual assault survivors by wearing jeans.

It was an issue that caught her attention. Growing up in Detroit, Michigan, Wilson (pictured above, glasses and denim jacket) and her mother had both been targets.
“Studies show that if you walk into a college classroom, chances are someone in there is a survivor,” says Wilson, now an assistant teacher at the Emory Autism Center.

So in her sophomore year, when she heard about a new program that involved students teaching students how to support sexual assault survivors, Wilson signed up.

At the time, Sexual Assault Peer Advocates (SAPA) was just finding its footing at Emory, a still-new program created by two students not unlike Wilson—women determined to turn their personal experiences and convictions into a campaign for social change.

“When I first arrived at Emory, sexual assault was something my friends didn’t even talk about,” says Wilson. “By the time I graduated, freshmen would just come up and ask how they could sign up for SAPA training—as if it was the thing to do, an accepted part of Emory culture.”

To Wilson, the definitive evidence that SAPA was making a difference came unexpectedly: “We were talking about sexual violence in class one day, and I realized we weren’t using the most current statistics,” Wilson recalls.

Before she could say anything, voices from throughout the classroom were blurting out corrections straight from the SAPA training manual—the very information they’d hoped to weave into campus dialogue.

“I remember thinking, ‘This is what happens when you start a conversation, when people begin to listen and understand,’ ” she says.

That shift was no accident. As the response to sexual violence on US college campuses began to expand beyond survivor support over the past five years, Emory has pursued a deliberate strategy that promotes student-centered, campus-based advocacy, prevention, and outreach.

“No student should ever live in fear of violence on our campus.”

-Ajay Nair

Today, Emory students who experience sexual violence not only find support and resources on campus (see sidebar), they also are finding opportunities to engage with the issue as activists and advocates.

The Power of Student Engagement
Emory has long provided advocacy for students and sexual violence survivors through the Center for Women at Emory. But as the response to sexual violence on US college campuses began to expand beyond survivor support in the past five years, the university has offered a growing array of resources dedicated to sexual assault prevention, education, and response.

-The Respect Program: A student-centered program in the Office of Health Promotion that engages the Emory community to prevent and respond to sexual violence; also hosts RespectCon, a national conference on social justice and the prevention of sexual violence in school settings, which this year drew more than one hundred attendees from twenty-nine US institutions.

-Sexual Assault Peer Advocates (SAPA): Founded and operated by students to train peers how to help survivors of sexual assault.

-Alliance for Sexual Assault Prevention (ASAP): A student-led organization that raises awareness about sexual violence through rallies, speak-outs, and other events.

-Issues Troupe: A student-centered program based in the Office of Multicultural Programs and Services that employs theater to explore issues that affect college students.

-Creating Emory: Enlists first-year students to have a voice in shaping the norms and values of their campus community.

-Grads Against Violence (GAV): Student-led coalition engaging graduate and professional students with prevention and support programs.

-Haven: A sexual violence awareness online training module required for every incoming undergraduate, graduate, and professional student beginning this fall.

-Staff support: Drew Rizzo, a health promotion specialist for the Respect Program, was hired to increase prevention efforts, particularly social norm campaigns, collaborations with fraternities and sororities, and expansion of graduate student involvement.

-Centralized sexual misconduct adjudication: Allows allegations to go before one hearing board with trained faculty, staff, and student adjudicators.

-Eagles Speak: A student organization that encourages civil dialogue around controversial issues through campus debate.

-Center for Women at Emory: Offers a course based on the Men Stopping Violence community-accountability model; coordinates the Intimate Partner Violence Working Group.
Support for sexual assault survivors is available through Counseling and Career Services and Student Health Services.

Title IX deputy coordinators and investigators: Members of the Emory community trained to coordinate compliance efforts and investigate complaints of sexual misconduct, creating expanded channels for reporting. Title IX is the federal law requiring universities to address sexual misconduct.

From organizing “Take Back the Night” rallies, challenging peers to consider “How do you give consent?” at a Wonderful Wednesday table, and helping to organize RespectCon, a national conference on sexual violence prevention and social justice on college campuses, now hosted annually at Emory, students are stepping up to take a pivotal role in prevention efforts.

They’re also making the issue okay to talk about, spotlighting it through theatrical performances, YouTube videos, Greek initiatives, and new student orientation—all intended to help peers not only think about the problem of sexual violence, but own the need to help solve it.

It’s part of a growing—and experts say necessary—trend, as strategies for stemming sexual violence on campuses are increasingly harnessing the power of college students as change agents.

This spring, a report from the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, coupled with widespread media coverage of reports of sexual assault on US college campuses, pushed the issue of sexual violence into a national spotlight as never before.

In June, a National Center for Education Statistics study reported a 51 percent increase in forcible sex offenses on American college and university campuses during the past decade, with reported incidents rising from 2,201 in 2001 to 3,344 in 2011. Even now, lawmakers on Capitol Hill are deliberating how the issue might be addressed through legislative remedies.

Sexual violence—unwanted sexual contact that may range from groping to sexual battery to rape—certainly isn’t a problem exclusive to higher education. It plagues college campuses just as it occurs in every corner of modern society.

But at colleges and universities, often seen as a formative incubator intended to nourish young minds as they step from youth to adulthood, crimes of sexual violence challenge the ideal of higher education as a safe haven for learning.
According to the US Justice Department’s National Institute of Justice, one in five women and one in thirty-three men will be the target of sexual violence during their college years—most often perpetrated by someone they know and in their first two years on campus.

Studies cite alcohol as a frequent factor, present in more than half of sexual assaults reported on college campuses. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, nationally more than ninety-seven thousand students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four experience alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape.

While that doesn’t mean alcohol causes sexual assault, it does mean that campus actions to prevent high-risk alcohol use overlap with efforts to prevent sexual assault, according to Emory’s Office of Health Promotion.

As a major liberal arts research university and an acknowledged resource in public health and human behavior, Emory is well positioned to help change that landscape, says Senior Vice President and Dean of Campus Life Ajay Nair, who calls sexual violence “one of the greatest social justice and public health issues of our time.”

From student education, support, and prevention resources available through Emory’s Respect Program and a focus on sexual violence before and during new student orientation to a reevaluation of Emory’s sexual misconduct policy and a newly centralized hearing board system, the university already has much in place to help.

And those efforts are expanding. In April, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Claire Sterk and Nair appointed the Emory University Sexual Violence Prevention Visioning Task Force, a new, multidisciplinary alliance that melds the intellectual talents of key campus resources—including faculty, staff, researchers, and student leaders—with behavioral scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) who study violence prevention on a national scale.

In creating the task force, Sterk and Nair assert that sexual violence on college campuses can not only undermine students’ academic careers, it also has the power to create an “economic and social ripple effect” during their lifespans.

“Emory is using all the best practices currently available; however, we have still not eradicated sexual violence,” Nair says. “In order to do that, we need more research to create that next batch of best practices.”
“We also need to understand the root of the problem,” he adds. “This is an unprecedented opportunity to leverage the intellectual strength of our faculty with the expertise of the CDC to inform our practice.”

The goal: develop comprehensive, evidence-based strategies aimed at preventing and reducing sexual violence. Members will review Emory’s existing support and prevention programs and provide recommendations by this fall.

“No student should ever live in fear of violence on our campus,” Nair says. “Our obligation as an institution is to ensure that students can flourish, that they can reach full potential.”

Laura J. Hardman 67C, chair of the Board of Trustees’ Campus Life Committee, emphasizes the university community’s broad commitment to addressing the issue.

“There is commitment from across the enterprise to efforts toward prevention of sexual violence in our community—trustees and alumni, students, faculty, and staff,” Hardman says.

“I think Emory is well positioned to address one of the most intractable problems facing our society globally with resources that include engaged community members, innovative programs, and research upon which to base our efforts.”

Cecilia “Ceci” Gilmore 12C recalls attending a women’s studies class during her first semester at Emory when she heard that one in four women would be sexually assaulted during her lifetime.

“I looked around the room and thought, ‘I don’t party, I don’t drink too much, I’m not out walking late at night by myself—this will never happen to me.’”

Then it did.

In 2009, her second semester at Emory, a former high school boyfriend—by then a student at another area university—invited her out for Valentine’s Day. They ended up at his apartment. “I had one drink, and the next thing I knew I was waking up the next morning, having blacked out. I sort of knew what had happened, but was trying to make myself believe it hadn’t.”

Distraught, she went to Emory University Hospital. Gilmore had never had a pelvic exam before and found herself overwhelmed, the exam room crowded with a friend, DeKalb Rape Crisis Center staff, Emory medical personnel, and two female police officers from the other campus.
That night, campus police searched her ex-boyfriend’s apartment—and that’s when her phone “started blowing up” with calls from mutual friends urging her to drop the accusation for fear of “ruining his life.”

Weeks later, Gilmore found herself dissolving into tears at random moments. She sought counseling, left school briefly, and for a while, blamed herself. Leaning on friends and family helped restore her strength, recalls Gilmore, who now teaches at a middle school in Jacksonville, Florida.

“At one time, I’d been on the other side of this—I’d looked down on people and thought, ‘They probably asked for it,’” she says. “But no one deserves to be treated that way.”

“If someone goes into a bank and steals something, that’s a crime. To have that happen to your body? This is your body, your personal being. They have to ask.”

Although she filled out an initial report through the other university, in the end Gilmore dropped the complaint.

“I couldn’t be traumatized again,” she says.

This spring, the US Department of Education released a list of fifty-five colleges and universities—including some of the nation’s premiere institutions—currently under Title IX review by the department’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

Best known for breaking down barriers for women in sports, Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender for educational programs that receive federal funding. It also protects students from gender-based violence and harassment.

Although Emory was on that list, university administrators say the investigation was not prompted by a student complaint. Instead, it is an OCR compliance review of the university’s Title IX policies and procedures; administrators report that Emory is cooperating fully with the process.
Part of the attention may stem from a rise in the number of Emory students now stepping forward to report sexual violence—a trend that most likely reflects the success of Emory’s efforts to increase education and awareness around the issue, Nair says.

From 2010 to 2012, the number of Emory students reporting forcible sex offenses more than doubled, rising from ten to twenty-five, according to reports filed under the Clery Act, which requires colleges that participate in federal financial aid programs to disclose crimes on or near their campuses.

“One interpretation might be, ‘You have a problem on your hands,’ and that would be right,” Nair says. “But we’re also working hard to create an environment where students feel comfortable reporting sexual assault.”

For students and staff who work with Emory’s support and prevention programs, the White House report sent an important message, says Lauren “L. B.” Klein, assistant director of Emory’s Respect Program, which engages the campus community to prevent and respond to sexual assault and relationship violence.

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“’To have federal support for the work we’re doing and to see that set as a national priority? I know that our students feel galvanized, because this report validates a lot that they’ve already been doing,” says Klein, who cochairs the Emory-CDC task force with Jessica McDermott Sales, associate research professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Health Education at Emory’s Rollins School of Public Health.

The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault describes campus sexual assault as “chronically underreported,” arguing that victim reports alone don’t provide a fair measure of the problem or the response.
Last year, Carolyn Livingston, senior associate vice president of campus life and Emory Title IX coordinator for students, helped oversee a realignment of Emory’s sexual misconduct adjudication process.

“Each undergraduate, graduate, or professional school had a different policy or process,” she says. “Part of the recommendation was to centralize it.”

Colleges across the nation are now grappling with the same question: When it comes to preventing sexual assault, what works?

While the work of this summer’s task force should help provide evidence-based answers, Klein says that she’s also encouraged about what she sees unfolding: a new online program Emory students will take before arriving, along with orientation programs for all incoming students; the launch of a Title IX Student Envisioning Board, which will bring together student leaders from around campus; and ongoing peer-to-peer advocacy.

Nowhere has that been more apparent than through the work of SAPA—the brainchild of Emory alumni Ceci Gilmore and Anushka Kapoor 13C 13B, who imagined and created a network of students training peers how to help sexual assault survivors.

Today, Klein estimates, nearly two thousand Emory students have completed some level of SAPA training. It’s made a difference. According to referral data from the Respect Program, approximately one-third of clients who sought help through Respect in the 2011–2012 academic year were referred by SAPA-trained peers—that number jumped to 54 percent in 2012–2013.

“Emory is a different place because of SAPA,” says Kapoor, now a financial analyst in Atlanta. “It changes lives, provides students and survivors with resources and a voice, and changes the way other people perceive survivors.

“Once you experience that, it becomes a part of your life—how you speak to people, how you see things. In fact, I still feel that at work in my life today.”
“Ceci” Gilmore and Anushka Kapaoor

SAPA Founders

Before they ever met, Ceci Gilmore 12C (pictured above) and Anushka Kapoor 13C 13B shared an ambition.

Their backgrounds couldn’t have been more different: Kapoor was raised in India, arriving at Emory to study finance at Goizueta Business School. Gilmore was a Georgia native, drawn to campus with plans to major in international and women’s studies.

But a shared desire to stop sexual violence would create common ground, driving them to become activists and advocates.

For Kapoor, the motivation rose from her work around the issue at Emory. For Gilmore, the drive was rooted in personal experience: she was assaulted during her freshman year while visiting at an area university.

“I used to think that it would never happen to me,” says Gilmore. “Being assaulted changed my view.”

Both were aware of existing campus resources, but saw potential for something more. Kapoor volunteered with Emory’s Alliance for Sexual Assault Prevention and was inspired by her training on how to talk to survivors.

“We knew that students who are assaulted are primarily in contact with other students,” says Kapoor. “I realized the importance of that.”
Together, they created Sexual Assault Peer Advocates (SAPA) to train Emory students how to talk with and assist sexual assault survivors. At the first training, twenty-three students showed up. “It was so powerful to see all these people gather to talk about what they could do to help—among the most amazing hours of my life,” recalls Kapoor.

Caleb Peng

Creator of Project Unspoken

“What do you do on a daily basis to avoid rape, sexual assault, or harassment?”

As Caleb Peng 13C asks the question, his camera lens fixes upon a series of male faces—students, staff, and even University President James Wagner. One answers with a confused half grin: “Well . . . travel in groups?” he begins. “No, not really. I’m not really worried about it personally.”

Others are more direct: “Nothing in particular . . . Don’t think that’s something that ever really crosses my mind . . . I can’t say that I have personally felt at risk of that.”

But when the lens turns to women, strategies pour forth: “Be aware of my surroundings . . . Walk where it’s well lit . . . Travel with large groups . . . Don’t take drinks from strangers at a party . . . Don’t make eye contact with those I don’t know . . . ”

Peng created the video Project Unspoken: I Am Tired of the Silence during a 2012 summer internship with Emory’s Respect Program to raise awareness around sexual violence.

Since then, the project—now a series of five videos—has drawn more than forty thousand YouTube views and has been used by more than one hundred schools in more than twenty-five countries, as well as earning attention from the White House.

Now a residence hall director fellow in Campus Life’s Office of Health Promotion preparing to begin master’s work at Rollins School of Public Health this fall, Peng arrived at Emory with little awareness of sexual assault.

Taking a women’s studies class opened his eyes. Later, when a close friend disclosed an attempted rape, “It took me aback. I hadn’t realized how sexual violence could be so detrimental,” he says. “It changed her whole world.”
“Although I’ve never experienced sexual violence, that shouldn’t matter,” he says. “The pressure should be to help change our culture.”

Lauren "L.B." Klein and Drew Rizzo

The Respect Program

When it comes to how US colleges address sexual violence, Lauren Klein and Drew Rizzo have witnessed a decade of rapid change—from the days when sexual assault was rarely spoken of to the emergence of survivor support services, from an emphasis on risk reduction to campus awareness and prevention campaigns, and more recently, the use of Title IX as a tool for curbing sexual violence.

Still, there are no easy answers: “There’s a perception that this is something that rarely happens and we can’t do anything about it,” says Klein, who coordinates the Respect Program through Emory’s Office of Health Promotion, engaging the community to prevent and respond to sexual assault. “Actually, this is really pervasive, it’s rooted in culture, and we can change that culture.”

The Respect Program’s strategy has been a proactive, student-centered approach: raising campus awareness through public events and new student orientation; peer-led trainings on how to support survivors; confidential advocacy, crisis intervention, and referrals; and direct dialogue with student organizations around targeted issues.

Last fall, Drew Rizzo was hired to strengthen those efforts as a dedicated health promotion specialist within the Respect Program, working directly with a Greek initiative and the student-run Alliance for Sexual Assault Prevention (ASAP).

Part of his role: engaging students in “The Talk,” a no-holds-barred dialogue on what constitutes healthy, respectful sex and relationships. “Students intuitively think they have similar backgrounds around this, but there are varying degrees of understanding,” he says. “If we have those kinds of discrepancies around intimacy and communication, then what discrepancies do we have around critical issues like coercion and consent?”

Khatdija Meghjani

Creator of the Red Lips Project

It was while working for Volunteer Emory that Khatdija Meghjani 12OX 14C was introduced to Men Stopping Violence, a Decatur-based
nonprofit that engages perpetrators of violence to help change the ways they view and treat women.

Meghjani wondered: Why not take that framework and apply it to women?

That’s how she came to create the Red Lips Project, a campus campaign that empowered young women around issues of self-worth, using group meetings “as a means to heal and share a space that allowed women to be themselves.”

The idea: If a woman has self-worth and self-respect, she’ll have the power, ability, and gumption to leave an abusive relationship, reasoned Meghjani, who graduated in May with degrees in sociology and international studies, with plans to become a human rights attorney.

She developed the campaign while working as a summer intern with the Respect Program—a position she was drawn to out of personal experience.

“I am a survivor of sexual assault—once while I was in college and once when I was very young,” Meghjani explains. “It is a driving force of who I am and what I want to be. I also know that I’m not alone. Many believe that they are alone. I wanted to help them realize that they are not.”

The process was healing for her, too.

“The project grew and helped quite a few women, including myself, understand what it means to be part of a community that loves you for who you are,” she says.

Ryan Sutherland

**Performer in Sex Ed Troupe**

As a student at Emory, Ryan Sutherland 16C has assumed many roles: Music and biology major contemplating medical school; Sexual Assault Peer Advocate (SAPA) facilitator, training others how to support and speak with sexual violence survivors; volunteer with both Emory’s Emergency Medical Service program and Global Medical Brigades, which promotes global health and sustainability; and summer intern with the Respect Program.

But a natural-born actor he is not. “My acting career began and ended in the sixth grade,” jokes Sutherland, a rising junior.

Yet Sutherland has found his voice—and a sense of advocacy—through Sex Ed Troupe, a student-powered program at Emory that uses skits, monologues, and short plays to explore issues that deeply affect college
students, including real-world matters such as how to negotiate conversations and expectations around safer sex.

“What was really interesting to me is the whole idea of making theater a forum for change,” he explains. “The best part of the performance is what people walk away with, the fact that it provokes a conversation.”

This summer, Sutherland is serving as a student representative on Emory’s Sexual Violence Prevention Visioning Task Force, a new, multidisciplinary alliance that brings together Emory’s strengths and scholarship with behavioral scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop evidence-based strategies aimed at preventing and reducing sexual violence.

“One of the things that is exceptional about Emory is our response strategy,” he says. “To be able to add my voice to the discourse, to talk about this with students, faculty, and CDC scholars is amazing—it’s something that wouldn’t have been done ten years ago.”

Elizabeth Neyman

**Current SAPA President**

When Elizabeth Neyman 15C wants to illustrate how far Emory’s Sexual Assault Peer Advocate (SAPA) program has come, she begins with the training she attended in 2011 during her freshman year.

Back then, there were only a handful of SAPA facilitators. Today, the student-based organization has trained nearly two thousand Emory students, staff, and faculty members in how to support survivors of sexual violence.

Not only are students more aware of SAPA, they’re actively seeking training. Now, resident advisers (RAs) routinely receive training, as well as those who help with freshman orientation.

This past year, Neyman says, not only has sexual assault moved more fully into campus dialogue, prevention efforts became a key campaign issue. New Student Government Association President Jon Darby 16C has not only been through SAPA training—and urged others to do the same—but has pledged to work to end sexual assault on campus.

SAPA strives to create a supportive campus for sexual assault survivors by training a network of peer advocates to help those who disclose assault and empower survivors to access resources.
“Over the past three years, I’ve definitely seen change,” says Neyman, current SAPA president and a rising senior in interdisciplinary studies in society and culture.

“When I first got here, activism around this involved a few engaged students, mostly sexual assault survivors, trying to get students to care,” she says.

“Now, I think we’ve reframed sexual violence as everyone’s issue. Everyone knows what SAPA is, no one has an excuse not to know what consent is, and everyone has the responsibility to support survivors and listen to friends.”