

CITY NEWS

WATERLOO CHRONICLE

'I was raped'

One University of Waterloo student's fight for compassion

BY SAMANTHA BEATTIE
Chronicle Staff

Emma Fisher-Cobb simply wanted to get the bottle of medication to treat her damaged throat, but the pharmacist wouldn't stop pressing her.

Where was her infection? Why did she need them? What they were for?

Finally, she snapped.
"I was raped."

That stopped the pharmacist cold. Fisher-Cobb grabbed the medication and, although in a daze, rushed to her first counselling appointment on the University of Waterloo's campus where she was a student.

"Being raped was something that had never occurred to me would happen in my life," she said.

The counsellor began by telling her she was late for her appointment; and later, that they didn't have room for her. An experience that felt jarring and without compassion.

"If I needed counselling on an ongoing basis — if I needed it, I had just been raped so I felt like I did — I'd have to go somewhere else," Fisher-Cobb recalled.

Armed with only a phone number, she booked herself in at the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region, located in downtown Kitchener. Her appointment was a month away.

In that time, she had trouble functioning, as she calls it, "like a normal human being." Going to class was a challenge. Completing assignments wasn't an option. She withdrew into herself.

"At the time the University of Waterloo was pushing their mental health services, but I never felt like they were there when I needed them."

Fisher-Cobb was reeling from what, in retrospect, appeared to be a planned attack.

Near the end of a trip in Iceland, a British man separated her from her friend and pushed her into a room. He raped her and severely damaged her throat.

She jumped out of a window to escape.

Back in Waterloo, Fisher-Cobb didn't report it, but she did seek medical help at the student health clinic. The doctors and staff there were supportive, non-judgmental and



Emma Fisher-Cobb is a University of Waterloo who was raped while on a trip to Iceland. When she returned, getting support was more difficult than she imagined.

SAMANTHA BEATTIE PHOTO

helpful, giving her the prescription for antibiotics. The also gave her the referral to the counsellor and a doctor's note.

Fisher-Cobb approached each of her five professors individually, note in hand. For some professors, it wasn't enough and she was pressed for details. One professor would only provide a two-day exemption, so Fisher-Cobb had to get her doctor to send an updated note and email driving the point home. Still, the professor gave her a hard

time throughout the semester.

"I know I wasn't sunshine and rainbows to deal with all the time, but it gets tiring advocating on my own behalf and having to skirt around this emotional issue while also trying to say it's severe enough that I need some extra time," she said.

"University of Waterloo can be a tough place to be. It attracts the best and brightest, but it's so hypercompetitive people don't have their empathy glasses on sometimes."

Being supported

"Can we do better?" asked Prof. Constance Backhouse at a panel discussion held by the University of Waterloo in March. Backhouse works at the University of Ottawa and is the research chair on sexual assault legislation in Canada.

"Our culture is hyper-sexualized and becoming increasingly violent in a very public way. Is there a special role for colleges and universities in this bleak picture I've painted?"

Her answer was yes.

"Brave women are speaking out. There's change afoot, most vividly at the post-secondary level. Our job is to support it, not let it be stamped out. We can't let them flounder at the front lines. We need to think about how to protect them."

Her talk came a couple of years after Fisher-Cobb's experience, and a couple months after the University of Waterloo enacted its standalone sexual violence policy. Like all Ontario colleges and universities, it was mandated to do so by the provincial government. Ian Orchard, academic and provost vice-president, said the policy will make a difference in how the university handles and prevents sexual assaults.

"(Policy 42) supports individuals affected by violence, provides education and support to raise awareness, assists individuals and decisively addresses complaints," Orchard said at the panel discussion.

What the Sexual Assault Support Centre's Joan Tuchlinsky looks for in this type of policy is not just compliance to the government's mandate, but also compassion.

"People in key roles need to understand the nature of sexual violence and that its impact is very different for people depending on their background and experiences," the public education manager told the Chronicle.

The University of Waterloo is planning on doing this by hiring a sexual assault support co-ordinator — a job that's currently posted. Its neighbour, Wilfrid Laurier University, has had that role in place for some time.

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Universities hire support staff to help sexual assault victims

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The co-ordinator's job is to work with victims of sexual assault to link them to counselling and health services, help them understand the university's policy and work out academic exemptions and extensions on their behalf — a person whose support Fisher-Cobb would have benefited from.

Staying informed

At the panel discussion, a woman in the audience shared how three years ago, she'd received sexually harassing emails from her professor. She said she was not offered mental health resources to help her cope, or kept in the loop.

"I was aware he wasn't allowed back on campus for a year, but I didn't know when he'd be allowed back and that was really tough," the woman said. After graduating, she secured a job on campus.

"I wasn't able to prepare myself to see him again at the institution I still worked at."

Mahejabeen Ebrahim, director of equity, said when it comes to informing victims

of disciplinary action, the university will continue as it has always done to, "Keep survivors informed."

"There are certain specifics as to what's shared, and we're still working on those details, but they will know if the matter was addressed formally or informally," Ebrahim said.

The outcome of the investigation is shared with the victim and perpetrator in writing.

As for counselling services or lack of — an issue Fisher-Cobb also experienced — Chris Read, associate student provost, said the campus has "had some ups and downs with wait times, but has historically done a good job."

He pointed to a new initiative this school year, where students can get walk-in appointments.

What Tuchlinsky would like to see is a situation similar to that of Laurier, where counsellors from the Sexual Assault Support Centre work on campus up to two and a half days a week. They're trained in helping survivors of trauma and sexual violence.

Under a service agreement, the centre also provides on-campus public education two days a week.

Surviving

Fisher-Cobb just wrapped up her final semester as an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo. She doesn't feel like she's completely healed — and maybe she'll never be — but she's striving to change perceptions around consent and sexual violence.

She's a Girl Guide leader and teaches her kids and Scouts to say no to gender-based violence, protect themselves and help friends who experience it, and puts a focus on respecting boundaries and boosting self-esteem.

She also wants to share her experience to create change.

"When you question people on this dialogue that women owe men something, by talking about your personal experience, it can really shift the way they are thinking about it," Fisher-Cobb said.

For more information on sexual assault supports, visit www.sascwr.org/.




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