

## Sexual Assault Survivor Speaks Out

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By Rosemary Revell, Democrat staff writer



Linda Scangarella, sexually assaulted about 30 years ago, told the story as if it happened yesterday. “I was in my early 20s. I had had my boyfriend over, and he had left. Within one minute — it was amazing they didn’t cross paths — there was a knock at the door. Thinking it was my boyfriend, I swung open the door. A very handsome man walked in; if he had asked me out, I would have gone. You’d think rapists would look different, like monsters, but they don’t. “He forced me into my bedroom, and I had my first out of body experience. I felt like I was watching it, not experiencing it. It hurt, but it didn’t hurt,” said the now 52-year-old El Dorado Hills woman.

Scangarella described the experience as if she were floating above the bed looking down. Called dissociation, it is a coping mechanism — an individual literally separates from an experience too traumatic and too terrible to endure.

Scangarella recently shared her story to support the Center for Violence-free Relationships’ outreach in education, advocacy and services. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and the center will host the seventh annual Community March to Stop Rape at 10 a.m. on Saturday, April 25, in downtown Placerville.

The center’s executive director Matt Huckabay, of Cameron Park and director of community affairs Kelly Plag, of Folsom sat by Scangarella as she spoke. “The whole point for Linda is to get people to come to the center, and I am deeply grateful to her for opening her home and life with the intention of raising awareness,” said Huckabay. “After it was over, then it really hurt,” Scangarella continued. “And the worse thing was that he said he’d come back. I didn’t call the police. I took a shower. I felt gross. It was at work that I realized I could get pregnant, so I went to my doctor. I told him, ‘A man forced me to have sex with him.’ The doctor said, ‘Linda, you’ve been raped.’ I told him, ‘No, a man forced me to have sex with him,’ and the doctor repeated, ‘Linda, you’ve been raped.’”

Scangarella and her physician went through the conversation several more times until he finally broke through her denial and sent her to the hospital. At the time sexual assault awareness was still in the dark ages. Law enforcement, legal authorities and even some medical personnel, as well as the general public, harbored some thought that the woman must have done something to ask for the sexual assault. “The police violated me and my friends violated me. People don’t behave well. They thought I was pregnant and lying to conceal it. Even my father — some of the things he said were unbelievable,” said Scangarella. “It was the 1970s, and I was a liberal, but I believed in the death penalty for rapists and molesters. Being raped is like getting your foot

caught in a wolf trap. For the rest of your life there is always pain,” she said. “Sometimes I’d forget about it, but then someone would kick it and remind me. It always seemed easier to die. Rape kills your soul. It’s like a big ugly thing on your head. Everyone knows what’s happened to you, and it’s uncomfortable. I stopped the process (of healing and treatment); it was too violating.”

Scangarella said she developed an eating disorder after the attack and its aftermath. “So I went on with my life, but if anybody gave me a reason to be mad, I’d release that anger held in from the past,” she said. “Then one day I went outside, and I looked into my house through the windows. My husband and daughter were in the kitchen making a big mess, and there was a roaring fire. I thought, ‘I have what other people want, and I can’t enjoy it.’ So I went on a journey.”

### **Healing**

“I went to counseling and Al-Aanon. I realized my mother had been molested and my grandmother was an alcoholic,” Scangarella said. “My mother couldn’t parent me; she just survived. I started talking to other people and helping them and realized what it was about — taking something negative and turning it to good.”

Scangarella had her life back on track when a stranger violently attacked a loved one. Present trauma brought past trauma to the surface once more, and both together caused a breakdown in Scangarella’s ability to function. Her husband took action saying, “I refuse to give up on this family.”

He researched available options and found the Center for Violence-free Relationships. Because Scangarella was non-functioning, her husband went to the first appointment alone and he purchased the books to take home. Scangarella then started treatment at the center and for some months they both attended sessions, each with his/her own counselor. Scangarella’s husband was then able to discontinue treatment while Scangarella walked a healing path for the second time and arrived at victory.

“They saved a life. I have a debt I can never repay,” said Sangarella. Consequently, she and her husband rival the contributions of Blue Shield of California in their financial support of the center.

“There comes a point in your life where you decide that the awful thing that happened was a gift. I turn everything negative into something positive. Now when I’m afraid I just go with it, and each time I’m stronger. It gave me a sense of perspective. I don’t worry about money problems. I think, hey, we’re all alive and all right,” said Sangarella.

“When you go through the journey of healing it’s painful, but if someone said to me, ‘You have to do it again, and this time it will be three times harder,’ I would do it again. It is so much better. What is over there is freedom.”

Huckabay spoke highly of Sangarella’s husband as embodying the qualities society should foster in men — caring, nurturing and protecting as well as fighting for the well being of loved ones.

### **“I’m trouble”**

The change in Scangarella may have saved her from rape, kidnapping or murder not too long ago, and she did not have to say a word; body language alone told the would-be perpetrator that he had better not mess with her. “I have a nice car so I park at the back of malls, or I did; I don’t any more. It’s not a good idea. This guy came up to me. My car was the only one out there, so I started going a different direction. He followed me. Then I turned and started toward my car, and he followed me again. I got in and he went away. My body language told him I was trouble,” Scangarella said. Once Scangarella was in her car, she started shaking violently and went through her purse for every piece of candy she could find.

Huckabay explained, “An experience like Linda’s causes a fight or flight reaction in the body. It floods the body with endorphins so that it is capable of doing either one, but the endorphins deplete the blood sugar. That’s why Linda wanted the candy.

“We train people at the center to be safe with body language. Would-be rapists want an easy target. They don’t want somebody who is going to make trouble. They want someone easy,” Huckabay explained.

“I took karate for years. I realized you have a small window of opportunity (to resist the attack), and if you miss it because of denial it’s too late,” Scangarella said. Huckabay agreed, saying, “You’d better have a plan because once fear kicks in it’s all over.”

### **Issues and info**

What happened to Scangarella is called stranger rape, a sexual assault in which the victim does not know the perpetrator. Much more common is the assault in which the victim knows the rapist as a family member, friend or casual acquaintance. In the second case, betrayal of trust and the destruction of the relationship are added to the issue of sexual assault. “You don’t always protect against someone you know,” said Huckabay.

The California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA) provides chilling statistics: One out of every four women and one out of every seven men have been sexually assaulted. Sexual assaults are underreported, especially for men, Huckabay said. The high-risk age period for females is from 18 to 24, especially if they are going away to college where they may become lonely and vulnerable. Women who join a sorority are even more at risk. Fraternity men work out rape scenarios and are helped by sorority women who assist in setting up sexual assaults because it happened to them, explained Huckabay and Plag. Women who drink to excess, binge drink or take drugs are at the highest level of danger, said Huckabay. He explained that women under the influence when raped may not even remember the event, but they still have the same issues. “We need to get the message out that mothers need to talk to their daughters especially at this time of year and also when young women go off to college,” said Huckabay.

The most chilling statistic provided by CALCASA states: “In a study of college students, 35 percent of men indicated some likelihood that they would commit a violent rape against a woman who had fended off an advance if they were assured of getting away with it.”

## **Progress and blame**

Great strides have been made in the attitudes toward rape in both medical and law enforcement personnel, and lawmakers are getting it, said Huckabay. Society at large, however, is not, and victim blaming is prevalent. People still think the victim was asking for the assault. Since April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, now is a good time for society to change its thinking. A woman who wears skimpy or tight clothing, dances suggestively, drinks to excess, binge drinks or takes drugs is not asking to be sexually assaulted nor is she giving anyone else the right to rape her. None of those behaviors indicate an interest in violence at all.

“Coercion is a huge issue, and society doesn’t even see it as sexual assault. Attitudes at large need to be changed. When a male teacher sexually assaults a female student, people see it as hideous; when a female teacher assaults a male student, society views him as lucky,” Huckabay said.

“The rapist is the bogey man, but we’re getting away from the rape word,” said Huckabay. The term sexual assault clearly indicates the violence inherent in the act, and it covers more than the actual act of rape. Threatening to withdraw love or break off the relationship if the victim will not engage in sexual activity are both now legally defined as sexual assault.

## **Help that heals**

Healing from violent assault is painful because it raises issues, but Huckabay says, “You survived the original experience. That was worse. Healing won’t be worse. “We’re in the business of saving lives. We want to limit the victimization. We have a friends and family program. Our counselors receive very specific training and have experience in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault,” said Huckabay.

The Center for Violence-free Relationships provides 24-hour crisis counseling, counseling by appointment, drop-in counseling, support groups, a safe house for women and children, professional legal help, court accompaniment and assistance, classes to change abusive behaviors and a batterers intervention program. The 24/7 crisis help line numbers are (530) 626-1131 or (916) 939-6616. Services are provided at no cost.

Those interested in helping the center end violence can apply for training to become a certified volunteer and/or support the center financially. For more information, call the office at (530) 626-1450 or (916) 939-4464 or e-mail [info@thecenternow.org](mailto:info@thecenternow.org).

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