

An Open Letter to the Miramonte Community

June 7, 2017

To the greater Miramonte community,

I didn't want to write another article about feminism. I know some of you reading this will exit Safari on your phones right away, close the tab on your computer, lock your tablet and never think about this letter again. And that's your choice. But I don't type this standing behind an altar, preaching yet another sermon from above, trying to tell others how to live their lives or what to believe. This letter is my confession.

Recent events in my personal life and events in the greater community have forced me to initiate a serious examination of my own shortcomings. Two years ago, I saw for the first time a male coach—we'll call him Coach Jones*—come up behind one of my teammates and close friends and hug her in a supposedly "friendly" manner. Although Jones wasn't our coach, every girl on the team knew him for obvious reasons. From then on, I witnessed first hand this same coach touch girls, many of whom were my best friends, in a demeanor that some will claim was just "friendly." Despite these assurances from bystanders, the girls were clearly, and rightfully so, uncomfortable with these grazes of hand against arm or thigh. Some even went as far as to tell Jones to stop, or physically pull away, but this didn't hinder him. These interactions went on for an extended amount of time, with the passive acceptance from other student-athletes, parents, and coaches. I encouraged my friends to talk to the administration and had discussions with other coaches about this man's inappropriate behavior, asking if anyone was doing anything about it.

But, in the end, I never told anyone who could make a

difference. It wasn't until I got called down into the office myself to talk about what I had seen that I realized that for years an entire community of people was protecting a man who was very visibly making students uncomfortable. Because we were scared of taking initiative? Because we wanted to be polite? I don't know. Technically, he wasn't doing anything illegal. He was making comments and touching girls in a way that was just too intimate, too close for comfort. But the point is that these actions repeatedly put multiple students in a position of powerlessness and extreme discomfort. I don't think anyone could tell you why there was an unspoken agreement between all of these people that bound them to silence, myself included.

To address a series of incidents completely unrelated to the previous situation I've been discussing, I'd like to move on to a more personal story.** An acquaintance of mine approached me in class one day, somewhat upset and resigned. After much coaxing, she told me how a student named Rodney* had made yet another degrading comment to her. I can't tell you how many times this year she has come to me with the same complaint. And I always heard her out, profusely apologized for this treatment, and encouraged her to talk to a teacher because the comments were clearly very detrimental to her mental health and not appropriate in any context, let alone school. I told her to tell someone, pushing the responsibility back onto her to shoulder this burden alone.

I should have grabbed her arm and marched her down to the office when I heard about the first comment. Again after the second. And the third and fourth and every single time after that. I should have done the same thing after Coach Jones touched and spoke to my friends inappropriately. I had not one or two, but countless opportunities to stop this disgusting and degrading treatment. We all did. And we collectively decided to abstain.

Now, this acquaintance told me about Rodney's most recent

comment a few days after I had been called into the office to talk about Coach Jones, so I had been stewing over my role in the former situation for quite some time. I don't know if I did it out of some sort of guilt obligation or just a new awareness of the need to actually stand by these girls (which I had preached for years but didn't practice), but after hearing her story I knew I had to ensure that it was reported to the office. However, as I was talking to her about why she should report the egregious comments, she revealed a critically important detail that is the center of this second narrative. She didn't think anything was worth reporting because she felt like she deserved to be treated that way. If it was another girl, she said, she would have reported it, but he only targeted her so it didn't really matter.

I can tell you that this theme isn't uncommon among women and girls when it comes to their own personal comfort and safety. I have had the privilege of growing up in a community where at most I have only faced very small, subtle instances of sexism. But this gross injustice against these girls cannot be overlooked, or fade away without grave and considerable discussion of what this says about us as a community. We continue to teach women to be polite and to smile in the face of discomfort because that is what is courteous, that is what is expected. We don't empower girls to protect themselves. Instead we all stand by listlessly, confirming the idea that these instances aren't "a big deal" and should just be brushed aside or ignored. This isn't to say that it was the responsibility of any of these girls to report these events to a person of authority. Too often we focus on teaching girls how not to get harassed or abused or raped, instead of teaching those who could potentially become harassers, abusers, or rapists that these things are wrong. This was even evident at Post-Senior Day, when seniors listened to the story of a brutal rape with a winding lead-up displaying all of the signs that should have told the victim that she was in danger. The retelling ended with one question: "How many opportunities

did the victim have to save herself?"

This is the problem that plagues our culture here at Miramonte, in Lamorinda, and across the entire nation. We place all of the burden on the victims to protect themselves, and teach our daughters and sons to say *nothing* in defense of these people who are basically defenseless themselves. Our kids deserve better. I'm not telling you this because I think I'm superior or because I have illusions of being the savior of these women. This is coming from someone who stood by and let this treatment continue for a long time. All of us need to take a serious look at what we are teaching the young people of this world to do—and what not to do—when we remain silent and foster a culture like this.

Madison Alvarado

*Name changed

**I ask you not to speculate as to who the people in this anecdote are. They are kept anonymous to protect the victim, and by forming conjectures about the subjects of incidents such as this we are simply continuing the harmful narrative that punishes those in need instead of protecting them.