

Twenty-five years of denim awareness

FORGING AN ALLIANCE

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April 1999, an Italian Supreme Court overturned a rape conviction previously made seven years prior due to the victim wearing “tight jeans.”

The then 45-year-old driving instructor took his 18-year-old driving student to an isolated road, pulled her out of the car and forcibly raped her. In the appeal, the judge stated that because the victim’s jeans were too tight, she must have assisted him in taking them off, therefore it was not rape and consensual sex.

This sparked outrage around the world. In Los Angeles, the news spread and Patti Giggans, the executive director of Peace Over Violence, asked those in protest to wear jeans. The first “Denim Day” was created and has continued over the last 25 years. However, over the years, with all of the awareness and education surrounding sexual assault cases, have things changed?

In 2008, Judge Derek G. Johnson of California victim blamed a rape victim when stating, "I'm not a gynecologist, but I can tell you something. If someone doesn't want to have sexual intercourse, the body shuts down. The body will not permit that to happen unless a lot of damage is inflicted... That tells me that the victim in this case, although wasn't necessarily willing, she didn't put up a fight."

This was stated after the evidence showed that the ex-boyfriend of the victim threatened to "mutilate her face and genitals with a heated screwdriver" among other violent threats. The perpetrator only received six years of prison time rather than the 16 years recommended by the prosecution.

In the same year as above, a judge sentenced a 47-year-old former high school teacher to only 31 days in jail after pleading guilty to raping a 14-year-old student. Two years later, the victim took her own life.

In 2013, the Montana Attorney General's Office filed an appeal to put the teacher back behind bars. The original judge in the case tried to apologize for his ruling, however, the Supreme Court barred him from the new appeal trial.

Canada, March 2017, a federal judge, Robin Camp, submitted his resignation due to his comments made in a 2014 trial of a rape case. Throughout the trial, he repeatedly asked the 19-year-old victim "Why couldn't you just keep your knees together?"; "Why didn't you sink your bottom down into the basin so he couldn't penetrate you"; and "sex and pain sometimes go together." Due to his victim blaming and shaming comments, he resigned after a 15-month review after the trial.

March of 2019, an Italian Supreme Court overturned a 2015 conviction of two Peruvian men stating that the victim was "too masculine and ugly" to be raped. During the rape, the victim received genital trauma where she required stitches from the horrific event.

Regardless of the evidence, in the appeal, they stated the men would have never had "sex" with her because one man labeled her as "Viking" in his phone and found her unattractive. The case was overturned.

Roe v. Wade is overturned in 2022. After the decision, a 10-year-old Ohio girl was raped by her mom's live in boyfriend and became pregnant. One month later, she and her mom traveled to Indiana to undergo an abortion.

During that time, the “heartbeat law” was in affect in Ohio and had no exceptions to rape or incest. Thankfully, the perpetrator in this case was sentenced to life in prison.

In 2022, a judge overturned a previous rape conviction of an Illinois man stating that five months in county jail was “plenty of punishment.” The victim in the case was not allowed to read her victim impact statement. The judge’s ruling was due to his decision that he felt the prosecutors failed to prove their case.

More recently, February 2024, a well-known North Carolina pastor, essentially blamed women’s clothing as justification to be raped. During his sermon, Reverend Bobby Leonard made a comment in regard to women wearing shorts or a short dress.

In his words, he states, “If you dress like that and you get raped and I’m on the jury, he’s going to go free... A man’s a man.” This has since sparked outrage on TikTok and other social media platforms, where victims are sharing what they were wearing when they got raped.

In one TikTok, a comment was made stating, “I was eight and wearing pajamas.”

These incidents since 1999 show that victim blaming and certain myths are being believed and validated in the court systems and the general public.

Sexual assault victims and survivors do not feel comfortable coming forward and reporting their assault in fear that things like those stated above may happen to them. For 25 years, we have been advocating and bringing awareness around this issue, and yet, it still feels as if we are back in 1999.

What does this mean? For the next 25 years, advocates, survivors and allies need to continue to elevate awareness and debunk myths surrounding sexual violence. We need to show that they are supported and believed.

We need to place blame back on the perpetrators who chose to sexually violate another person. We need to be supportive of male victims coming forward. While the #metoo movement was a major movement of our time and has changed some things, we need to continue to fight and speak out.

Denim Day is coming up on April 24. Show your support by wearing jeans and speaking out against sexual violence.

Mountain Crisis Services will be hosting Denim Day. Reach out to us by email katy@alliance4you.org or call us at (209) 742-5865 to reserve your photo timeslot and sticker count.

If you are interested in becoming an advocate, shoot us an email.

For survivors, our message to you is: we see you and we believe you. If you are a survivor of sexual assault and need support, call our business office or go to our website at www.mountaincrisiservices.org and schedule an appointment with an advocate.

Our services are confidential under Evidence Code 1037 and all services are free.

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