

# The Strength in Speaking Up and Speaking Out

## HOW KARLA HUIZAR EMPOWERS OUR COMMUNITY AT SANTA BARBARA STANDING TOGETHER TO END SEXUAL ASSAULT (SBSTESA)

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(content warning: discussions around sexual violence and related topics)

One of the most brilliant things about a community is the way that people can strengthen and support it. A truly strong community builds on the different concerns and passions that people hold, allowing unique social bonds to lift people up. Many people may say that strength always comes from the inside, as though it is something that can be pulled out and brandished like a weapon. However, oftentimes the only way to find the strength within us is through the help of others who see us as we need to be seen. Especially after we experience events that leave us feeling vulnerable and fearful, we should always feel like we have somewhere to go outside of ourselves. We need messages that remind us that the future will be better, brighter, and worth fighting for.

Karla Huizar, the educational coordinator at Santa Barbara Standing Together to End Sexual Assault (SBSTESA), understands the importance of all of these messages and connections to better a community. Born in Santa Barbara and with an extensive background in social work, she uses knowledge to make progress on preventing sexual violence. She tackles the topics that most of us are told to stay silent about, and by teaching us to recognize the harm in that silence, she makes the discussion around sexual abuse an opportunity to protect and improve the community. Through her classes and discussions, she stresses the importance of taking a hard look at our past in order to better the future. Something I've learned from Karla is that the most difficult conversations tend to be the most necessary ones.

### SBSTESA Broad Goals

SBSTESA is a non-profit community center that is focused on helping individuals who seek support following sexual assault and other related forms of violence. Their services can be divided into two categories: *responding to sexual assault* and *preventing sexual assault*. Responses to sexual assault include counseling and Advocacy & Accompaniment, emphasizing to survivors that they are not alone in navigating their next steps. Preventing Sexual Assault involves a wide range of educational methods and topics that help all kinds of audiences understand the scope of sexual violence. The current staff consists of 9 members and they are always taking volunteers to help with 24-hour phone intervention and other tasks. Karla offers her insights her experiences and the work of the organization to show the progress they have made in making Santa Barbara more safe and aware.



Image from SBSTESA Instagram @sbstesa

## Being Shaped by Involvement

As is the case with many people looking back on their emergence into adulthood, Karla's path to her job was not determined from the beginning. What she knew from the start was that she was passionate about helping others, and when we're young, this can mean many things. First and foremost, she wanted to improve lives and make the world better than how she found it. Karla had many options, and her education helped bring her closer to deciding how she could best reach her goals. She described an interest in criminal justice which she explored early on through a dual-enrollment program at her high school and Santa Barbara City College. Alongside learning about criminal justice, she also studied psychology, which resonated with her more. It was here that she made the important choice to pursue social services with a background in psychology over criminal justice. Currently, she is working to finish her bachelor's in Psychology.

Karla elaborates on how her work journey has helped her understand her passions on a deeper level. One of her first major jobs was at the Residential Program at the Housing Authority of Santa Barbara, where she would perform case management work with families to help them get housing and other related needs. She had worked with people of all backgrounds and especially enjoyed working with children and teenagers. In this job, she led an empowerment and educational group called "Choices" which helped young women achieve their goals, an experience that clearly inspired her future work. Her time there will always be valuable to her because it was where she got comfortable with addressing individual needs that connect to larger systemic failures. Throughout this work, she was active in volunteering to directly help with other issues, such as assisting those coming out of incarceration.



Images from Santa Barbara Housing Authority website

During her time at residential services, she had important conversations with people to learn about their conditions in order to provide solutions. One trend she was identifying was how common sexual violence was for people seeking housing. After seeing this, Karla considered her lack of experience with handling such situations outside of the required reporting mandates. Karla started asking the questions that brought her to SBSTESA, such as "What do we need to do?" and "How can I be better at helping survivors?" Instead of allowing the complex, heavy nature of sexual assault to frustrate her, she looked for answers and ways to move forward. This was a new realm for her, and it was through traversing the unknown that she found out how she wanted to help people. Eventually, she was recommended by her supervisor for a position at SBSTESA. Her consistent interest in education and working with younger groups led her to do fulfilling collaborative work with the previous SBSTESA Educational Coordinator.

From this part of her story, I was very touched by how much her experience with the real world shaped her personal goals. She fused educational experiences with work experiences together to understand her community as it truly was. She had to learn with time, energy, and lots of self-reflection that her initial plans were not going to fit for her. Where she could have chosen to stick with the familiar, she took a leap to pursue subjects that she still needed to learn extensively about. Her growth was happening as she worked with people, hearing their stories and finding new things every day. Her experiences and values regarding transparency, authenticity, and consistent self-reflection make her amazing in her field, and it should inspire all of us to approach sensitive topics in a similar way.

## Understanding Intervention and Prevention

For the first five years at SBSTESA, Karla was a training coordinator and performed extensive work with managing cases and teaching others how to manage cases. Her case management mirrored some of her prior work at the Housing Authority, for she would be directly supporting individuals who sought SBSTESA's services through counseling, advocacy, and helping individuals report. This would be done in many settings, including a 24-hour hotline, individual meetings, and group counseling. She was hearing stories similar to before, but with more of an emphasis on how such instances of sexual violence were profoundly affecting people's feelings of safety and identity. She engaged these difficult topics with continuous understanding, depth, and concern. Her understanding of her community grew more detailed and complex, which only drove her to look for longer-lasting measures to keep this pain from occurring in the first place.

She was also in charge of making sure that people who were coming into the organization were trained properly on intervention tasks. Currently, she has trained 200+ people in 15-18 training sessions. The thorough nature of this training demonstrates that this work is not easy and not everyone can do it. This training takes around 60 hours to complete with an additional 12 hours of education required every year. This helps intervention workers improve their practices and keep up to date with current issues that might affect the individuals they work with. It was especially helpful that Karla could conduct this training in English and Spanish, keeping her engaged with the two main linguistic communities of Santa Barbara. Through her efforts, she was the first person to hold the "Crisis Intervention Lead" position in 2019.



Karla greatly appreciates her first years at the organization, which is clear by the genuine concern she speaks with as she reflects on the relationships she's built over the years. Her role of providing immediate assistance to individuals is a necessary job within any kind of social service field. People opened up to her about what they've been through and what they hope to have in the future despite the pain they've faced, and Karla would offer her expertise to help get them what they need. It was very rewarding, but Karla eventually understood she wanted to expand from this role and into something different. She was working with people after violence had already been inflicted, making her work based on the existence of sexual assault. She wanted to look at reducing sexual assault and making the community more aware so it can improve and grow. In Intervention services, Karla still was not able to answer the questions of why sexual assault happens. Her switch over to Prevention services proves to be a great choice every day because now she can approach things with more positivity and hope. She still works with people in interpersonal settings and learns from other people's strengths as they share their stories. That part of her job will never change. It's just that the type of experiences she works with are more varied outside of what is told in Intervention. She gets to know people's wider backstories to get insight into how much they can benefit to learn about different dimensions of sexual assault prevention.



## The Scope of Education

Karla shows her passion by taking helpful, life-bettering information and communicating that to others in compelling ways. It makes her job fun and exciting every day because she gets to change her presentations and activities according to the audiences she interacts with. She emphasizes that the content she presents is age-appropriate and digestible, which encourages her to practice empathy with her learning audience. We discussed how sexual assault connects with larger beliefs relating to gender roles, bodily autonomy, everyday language, and more, allowing for a whole host of topics to be covered. She discusses at length her programs with middle schools and high schools around Santa Barbara. One of these programs, *Shifting Boundaries*, is focused on educating middle schoolers about what it means to have boundaries and the importance of setting them. As children are growing up and become more aware of their bodies and bodies around them, establishing such boundaries reduces the miscommunication that often occurs before and during an assault. They also learn about consent and under what conditions it is clear and voluntary. Karla voices her amazement at the ability of these young learners to understand these important concepts, concepts that are often labeled as taboo by adults. *Shifting Boundaries* has also been presented in other grade levels, even here at UC Santa Barbara.

**"A lot of people think prevention is like risk reduction, like carrying pepper spray, you know, carry your keys in your hands. Like that's risk reduction. Prevention is much deeper than that. It's literally creating a culture shift, like changing mindsets, really providing education about why sexual assault exists."**



Image from SBSTESA Instagram @sbstesa

Other education courses she's led include self-defense, general presentations on the organization's causes, and sexual harassment prevention training for workplaces. Awareness is needed for younger and older generations alike because everyone runs the risk of not recognizing sexual violence and believing harmful cultural myths. She works to make her teaching involved, safe, and memorable so that people walk away with a better intellectual and emotional grasp on the subject. Another large part of her job is reaching out to different organizations and attending local events to help her education reach further. She is always navigating local networks to get the organization's content out there. The easier this information is for people to access, the better the conversation is, and the more fulfilling her job is. Her collaboration with different corners of the Santa Barbara community makes her job profoundly more grounded and connected.

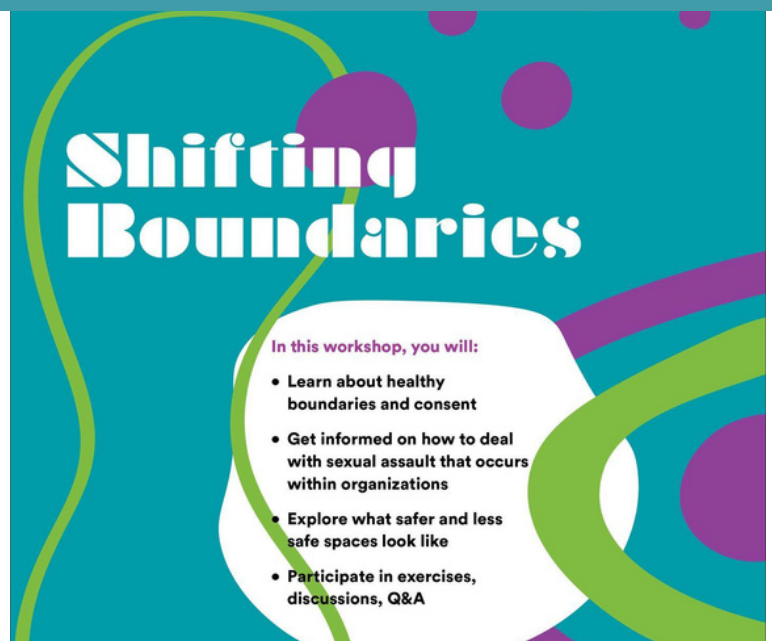
I asked Karla about her favorite aspect of her job, and her answer makes us both laugh. She loves teaching material to people and seeing the changes in their expression "when it clicks." When people show that her educational efforts are impacting them and making them reflect on their own experiences and beliefs, Karla knows her work is truly making a difference. Learners take her insights about what sexual assault looks like to heart. Toxic ideals about sexual assault are widely normalized in our culture (Karla points out the prevalence of this in Greek Life), and it is with these educational programs that people are deconstructing those norms to move forward with more wisdom. The best moments occur when people unpack their own ignorance and biases through discussion; she recalls a time when she experienced the same type of awakening.

Not only is Karla doing formal education in her job, but she puts effort in educating those in her personal life too. In the brief times she discusses her family, she admits that her family did not approach this topic much as she was growing up, which I can relate to. Although sexual assault is an issue that most adults are aware of, people in our personal circles might struggle to talk about it proactively due to fear, cultural expectations, and more. Karla and I both understand why our families were not straightforward in discussing such issues as we grew up. Despite this, Karla continues to question the biases of the people around her, such as her grandmother or some of the men in her life. Her circle has proven to be open about being challenged, which stands to be an essential aspect of making this work effective. Even in her most personal communities, Karla creates conversations that show the benefit of overcoming ignorance. This helped me reflect on my personal fears to approach people on their ignorance, and I hope to follow on Karla's example in the future.

After hearing about Karla's work and motivations, I find myself wishing I benefitted from her programs growing up. I look back on my own misconceptions of sexual and relational violence and how I was scared to ask questions. It would have been so helpful for my peers and I to watch her presentations as middle-schoolers/high-schoolers to learn about how sexual violence occurs and how we can stop it. Karla's work puts special emphasis on teaching younger students these lessons because it paves the way for a future that looks more hopeful and safe. The leaders of future generations are growing up and normalizing these conversations thanks to Karla and SBSTESA's dedication.



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## What Standing Together Needs

I asked Karla about some general thoughts on the wider discussion around sexual assault, and she emphasizes the importance of staying open and having the willingness to learn. She expresses appreciation for how open the Santa Barbara community has been to her programs, and she would want to see that receptivity on a wider scale. It's also important that this openness extends to broader issues of inequality and marginalization. She might not be able to tackle every form of oppression, but she is always keeping in mind the ways they intersect and build on each other. She wants people to know that they should not just accept life's cruelties as they are. These things can be confronted in productive, thought-provoking ways; it just takes people in the community to initiate that process. That can be a reason the organization is called "Standing Together to End Sexual Assault". Facing problems that seem larger than life does not need to be done alone, and the team at SBSTESA will always work to make sure people know that.