An Open Letter to Parents With Sons: Let’s Talk About How Gender Norms
Perpetuate Sexual Assault

**By: Bailey Smith**

Dear parents with sons,

I am writing to you as a concerned daughter. I want to discuss gender norms present in everyday households that may have adverse effects outside of the home. I also want to start off by acknowledging that I am not a parent – I am not aware of the hardships that come along with parenting and the emotional toll it can take on a person. Therefore, I want to commend you on everything you’ve done so far in raising your children and I am hoping that you will find the information I provide in this letter helpful in some way. Whether you are the parents of sons and daughters, or just sons, I hope we can all agree that sexual assault is an issue that affects both genders; this is not just a women’s issue – though it is often shaped as such.

Let’s look back to the Brock Turner assault which transpired in January of 2015. Turner, a second-year student at Stanford University, was found in the early morning hours of January 18th, penetrating an unconscious woman near a dumpster. Two international students biking through campus spotted Turner on top of the woman, who appeared to be motionless. The subsequent trial that began later in 2015 resulted in Turner being sentenced to six months in prison (though he was released after three months for “good behavior.”) I would like to call attention to the statement Turner’s father read during his son’s sentencing; Turner’s father said that his son’s life had been “deeply altered forever,” that Turner would “never be his happy go lucky self” again, and that his sentencing, which many believed was too lenient, was a “steep price to pay **for 20 minutes of action**.” If you would allow me, I would like to unpack what Turner’s father said and relate it to less severe situations which could transpire in day-to-day life.

I want to delve into this harsh example before moving into more covert ways in which male-dominant gender norms can lead to dangerous behavior. In this way, healthier home environments can be created for sons and daughters alike, and lead to safer living situations for all.

Turner’s father said that his son’s life had been “deeply altered forever.” Yet, Turner chose to alter his life; it was his decision to mount an unconscious woman and engage in sexual activity with her. What about “Emily Doe” (the survivor from Turner’s assault)? Is her life not “altered forever”? Of course it is. However, she had no choice in the matter. Turner’s father should not be lamenting that the course of his son’s life has changed when it was his son who chose this path.

Turner’s father had also said that Turner would no longer be “happy go lucky.” Would Turner still have been “happy go lucky” had his actions not been uncovered? If his son is no longer “happy go lucky,” perhaps Turner should be looking in the mirror, reflecting on his detrimental actions, and in this way, working towards a better tomorrow. A man denouncing the gravity of committing sexual assault should not feel “happy go lucky,” he should be taking responsibility for his actions.

 Lastly, and in my opinion, most offensively, Turner’s father said that his son’s sentence was a “steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action.” But those 20 minutes will impact Emily Doe for the rest of her life; she will always be a survivor – a label she did not chose, but one that Turner thrust upon her. What was only 20 minutes for Turner will be a lifetime for the survivor. So, is 3 months a steep price for Turner to pay? No. The price paid by Emily Doe is incomparable.

As a daughter, I am deeply hurt that as a parent, Turner’s father could not imagine what emotions he would experience if his own child were sitting at the prosecution table. If Turner’s father had a daughter who was sexually assaulted, I wonder if he would comfort her by saying, “Don’t be traumatized, honey, it was only 20 minutes of action.” With this example, I hope that we, as parents and children, can reflect on the gendered ways we interact with our children. If your daughter was sexually assaulted, think about how you would comfort her; think about how you would feel about the person who assaulted her.

While I’m sure that many of you do all that you can to prevent sexual assault from happening in your households, there are lesser, more hidden ways in which gender norms can affect sons’ behaviors. For example, if you have a son and a daughter, both in romantic relationships, and you let your son have sleepovers with his significant other, do you let your daughter do the same? In my experience, I have noticed that parents treat their sons differently than they treat their daughters; this indirectly shows sons that they have more power than their sisters, which can translate into their behavior outside of the home. This is not to say that giving your son more freedom than your daughter will cause your son to normalize sexual assault, it is only to point out that being exposed to more authority in the household may affect the way he interacts with women.

Keeping in mind the differing ways in which parents treat their sons and daughters, I’d like to turn our attention to a more recent example of sexual assault – the Larry Nassar case that began in 2016, regarding the U.S. Olympic gymnastics doctor who molested his patients. 156 women have stepped forward to reveal that they are survivors of Nassar’s actions. Earlier this year, a video surfaced which displayed three young women (all siblings) reading their victim impact statements to the judge presiding over Nassar’s case. Following this reading, the victims’ father, Randall Margraves, asked to have “five minutes alone” with Nassar – possibly implying his desire to beat up Nassar. When the judge refused him, Margraves lunged for Nassar. In a later court hearing which aimed to resolve this matter, Margraves stated that while listening to his daughters’ statements, he looked over at Nassar who was shaking his head “like [the assaults] didn’t happen.” The victims’ father then asks, “who would put themselves through this if [the assaults] didn’t happen?”

This question is worth answering, because I think we can all agree that nobody would put themselves through a public trial in which details of a traumatic experience have to be relived again and again. The disjunction between Turner’s father’s actions and Margrave’s actions are astounding – especially when looking at them through the lens of comparing a father of a son to a father of a daughter. I know that these are extreme, isolated examples, but I am asking you as parents to look at the bigger picture. Earlier, when I asked you to picture how you would feel about someone who assaulted your daughter, I wonder if you would hold your son to that same standard if someone accused him of sexual assault. Would you hold your son to the same standard that you would hold an unknown offender?

It is possible to disapprove of your child’s actions while still loving and supporting them. Therefore, I would like to argue that Turner’s father could have supported his son through his trial without condoning his actions. Doing so could have shown Turner that what he had done was unacceptable, though there was hope for redemption. It is apparent that Turner knew what he did was wrong; when he was discovered sexually assaulting Emily Doe by two international students, Turner got up and ran away. Why would you run from confrontation if you were secure in your actions? This shows that at the very least, Turner has a conscience; but, Turner’s father diminishing the seriousness of what his son did by saying it transpired in a mere 20 minutes has the potential to alter his son’s moral compass.

Ultimately, I am asking you to be aware of how you treat your sons and ask yourselves if you would treat your daughters or anyone who hurt them the same way. Raise your sons to be the kind of men who believe forcing sexual activity on a woman is unthinkable. Raise your sons to take no for an answer and teach them that “no” does not mean, “convince me.” The time of “boys will be boys” is up and I hope we can stand as a united front on this issue of sexual assault.