

SOURCE FEATURE

Anonymous Student Survivor: Layla

by Abigail Becker

When Layla was 12, she was touched inappropriately by a male family member. The family member, who was two years older than her, thought that she was asleep at the time. Layla froze, unable to react because she felt afraid and confused. “I didn’t know what to do because I’d never really been in that position before. I’d never learned about it,” Layla said. “I was just really uncomfortable, so I didn’t do anything.”

Layla attributed her inability to speak up to two factors: her young age, and her fear of how the assault would affect the perpetrator’s life. “I was thinking too much about ruining his reputation and hurting him and how I felt bad for him in that moment,” Layla said. “Looking back now, I would have a very different reaction.” Like Layla, more than 2/3 of survivors do not report sexual violence to the police,

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according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Of this 2/3, 7% of survivors don’t report because they don’t want to perpetrator to get in trouble.

Reflecting on the incident, Layla wishes that she had defended herself either verbally or physically. “It’s very difficult to speak up to your perpetrator, even if it’s after the fact. It’s so hard. But really, you need to be able to do that. It’ll save you from so much pain. [Speaking up in] that one moment [could] save you from

years and years of trauma,” Layla said.

For Layla, the concept of “putting yourself first” and learning to listen to gut instincts has aided in her recovery process. “If your gut says, ‘What’s happening is wrong, and this person shouldn’t be touching me like this,’ then do something about it. Don’t just sit there and be [uncomfortable],” Layla said. “I would rather have an embarrassing moment than have gone through everything I went through.”

Layla has accessed a variety of resources, both public and personal, during her healing journey. Two years after the assault, Layla decided to call the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-4673), an experience that made her feel affirmed and supported. However, she wishes that she had called earlier. “What I think is most important — what I missed out on — is getting the validation. If the first person you talk to says, ‘That’s wrong, you need to do something about it,’ it’s going to change everything,” Layla said. “[On the 24/7 hotline], there’s always someone there to respond. They really validate you. They can give you legal support. There [are] a lot of perks.”

She recommends that survivors, especially those of familial assault, contact an anonymous professional sexual assault resource to gain insight and expert knowledge before informing anybody else.

Layla also worked with a psychologist, recommended to her by a doctor, who “changed her perspective” and helped her come to terms with the fact that she was not responsible. Additionally, Layla cautioned against only using one support system. “I think that it’s nice to hear a new voice and a new person that validates you and explains the situation in a different light,” she said.

Friends and family members can also be helpful. According to Layla, survivors should carefully consider whom they decide to inform, as these conversations have occasionally become toxic in her experience. “I think it’s really hard to find the right balance of friends: who to tell, who not to tell. I really struggled with that. [...] There are not very many people that are mature enough to understand,” Layla

said. “I would recommend calling one of those hotlines or talking to a professional before you talk to other people that aren’t professionals in this space about it.”

In the weeks following the assault, Layla felt some blame from the people with whom she

decided to share her experience. “They were like, ‘Your clothes are too short,’ ‘Your clothes are too provocative,’” Layla said. “They made me feel like I was being dramatic. It just made me really self-conscious.” Layla explained how these reactions exacerbated the negative effects on her mental health and highlighted how important it is for survivors to be told that they are not at fault.

For this reason, Layla believes that people who are approached by survivors should prioritize kindness and empathy. “You can’t be judgmental or anything like that. You can’t ask, ‘What were you wearing?’ ‘Were you drinking that night?’” Layla said. “Because at the end of the day, there is nothing at all that makes sexual assault by any means acceptable. No matter how ‘provocative’ your clothes are, or how

under the influence you are, or what you say, no one is ever ‘asking for it’ unless they give clear and sober consent.” Layla also believes that it’s helpful to point survivors to expert resources, like a hotline.

Layla remembers learning about sexual abuse in the Menlo Upper School sex education program, and for the first time, realizing that she’d been sexually assaulted. She marked her freshman year as an important milestone on her journey of embracing that she was not to blame for the assault.

However, Layla’s self-healing journey is by no means complete, and she still struggles to believe that she is not responsible for the assault. “Slowly, I would start to peel back those layers and be like, ‘Maybe [the perpetrator] is at fault.’ But I’m never fully going to believe that,” Layla

said.

She stresses how important it is for survivors to access public support systems (pages 30/31). “I just think it’s really important to know that things are really different for ev-

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everyone and that there [are] a lot of things that happen after the trauma that aren’t really talked about. And I think it’s just as important as what actually happened,” Layla said.

Following the assault, Layla described having depression, thoughts of taking her own life and other mental health struggles. Initially, she coped by drinking alcohol, hanging out with bad influences and sneaking out. Now, Layla engages in healthier mechanisms, such as journaling and letter-writing. “Writing letters about how you feel to [the perpetrator] — not actually sending them — can be so helpful to get all your thoughts down on paper,” Layla said.

Layla chose to share her story with the Menlo community because she wants to bring awareness to sexual assault inside family systems. According to RAINN, 34% of juvenile sexual abuse cases reported to law enforcement were perpetrated by family members. However, sexual assault often goes unreported: only 12% of child sexual abuse is reported to authorities, according to the National Sexual Violence Research Center. “Family trauma is something that is so rarely talked about and a lot of people are so unaware that is happening,” Layla said.

She explained how she often receives comments on her social media posts, where people comment things like, “I want your life so bad,” and “Your life is so perfect.” But Layla knows how incorrect this assumption is. “What I really want to emphasize is that no one has a perfect life. No matter how perfect someone’s life seems, there’s always something [unseen] going on. And that’s something that a lot of people don’t know about me,” Layla said.

Layla hopes her story can help other survivors understand that they are not alone. “No one was there for me the days I really needed it,” Layla said. “[The day that I was assaulted], I felt alone, and it changed the entire trajectory of my entire future. I want to be the one that prevents anyone from feeling the way I did on that day.”



Staff illustration: Sophie Fang