Chorus of Survivor Voices – Beaumont Tower Concert

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Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us as MSU Music Presents “Our Time, Me Too”. My name is Tana Fedewa and I am the Director of the MSU Sexual Assault Program. I am honored to be speaking at this event during Sexual Assault Awareness Month. In preparation for today, I have been reflecting on the past year and the changes that have occurred within our campus community. I want to share with you a few ideas about how we need to evolve and change and then I am going to close with a call to action.

1. Recognizing a Chorus of Survivor Voices

First, I feel it is important for all of us to remember and acknowledge that there is no single survivor voice. Some MSU survivors have been recognized and celebrated for their bravery in telling their stories. Some MSU survivors have felt silenced, invisible and as if their stories and experiences do not matter to this institution. We need to recognize that there is a Chorus of survivor voices at MSU.

This chorus includes:

- People who were sexually assaulted before they ever stepped foot on this campus
- People who were sexually assaulted by a family member
- People who were sexually abused as a child
- People who were sexually assaulted their first week on campus
- People who were sexually assaulted by a partner
- People who were sexually assaulted by an acquaintance
• People who have been victims of hate and bias motivated sexual assault
• People who were sexually assaulted and/or harassed by someone in a position of power or authority
• People who are still being sexually assaulted
• People who are victims of alcohol-facilitated sexual assault
• People who are victims of multiple-assailant sexual assault
• People who have been sexually assaulted many times,
• People who have been sexually assaulted many times by many different people.
• People who told about their sexual assault and were not believed
• People who reported their sexual assault and received no justice
• Survivors who are hurting and feel as if they do not matter.

This list is not exhaustive. There are thousands of survivors on this campus. They work, and teach and learn all around us and struggle with their own memories, thoughts and feelings every day. They are listening and they are watching their peers, their colleagues, and our administration. We need to acknowledge and create space for many different voices and lived experiences. We must invite dialog and connection amongst survivors in our community. We must also speak of survivors with respect, treat them with dignity and we MUST believe them.

2. Committing to Culture Change

How do we change the culture at MSU? I can only suggest a place to start. First, we need to recognize that there is a social context that surrounds sexual violence. Sexual violence is tied to inequality. People who commit sexual violence often target people who may have less power in the world. Victims of sexual violence
are affected by many forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism and others. These forms of oppression often compound the effects of sexual victimization, exacerbating the trauma and isolation survivors’ experience. People of color; people living in poverty; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; elders; people with disabilities and other diverse persons are affected by sexual violence in unique and complex ways. As we strive to change the culture at MSU it is important for us to identify the problems and the approaches to prevention and response through an intersectional lens.

We must also examine the hierarchies that exist within our academic institution. We must acknowledge and deconstruct a culture that silences survivors and whistleblowers, a University culture that protects and defends perpetrators, a workplace where employees are expected to protect the institution, a campus community where threats and retaliation are prevalent, and an institution that responds by lashing out, discrediting, invalidating, and shaming survivors.

The survivor community feels betrayed. They struggle with navigating inefficient, complicated and shifting systems. Many feel that the University has created a hierarchy of survivors - that some survivors matter to the institution more than others. Our community can and should work to change this perception.

We know that folks from marginalized populations have additional barriers to reporting and/or disclosing their sexual assault experience. We must think about how we can elevate the voices and experiences of marginalized and oppressed people who are unable or choose not to share their story. We must also think about how we can create a campus and a survivor community that is safer and more conducive to story-telling and healing.

**Building a Community of Survivors**
So, how do we build community for survivors? First, I think it is important for allies, activists and advocates to step up and speak out. We need to set boundaries and expectations for language and behavior at MSU. Survivors need to know that they will be believed, supported, protected against retaliation, and defended when they are attacked. We need to intervene and challenge people when they are perpetuating myths or shaming survivors.

Next, we need to support survivors in creating a cohesive sense of community. They deserve to have the opportunity to connect, empower one another, celebrate one another, and sit with one another in moments of pain. It is very difficult for survivors to practice self-compassion when they are not met with empathy or compassion in their every day life. It is very difficult for survivors to work on their own healing when the campus community continues to cause harm. It is very difficult for survivors to take up space in the world when they are constantly silenced, invalidated, undervalued, placed in basements, and under-resourced. It is nearly impossible for survivors from marginalized groups to gather in community when there are very few spaces on this campus that exist for them.

I challenge you to think about how you can be an ally. Survivors need us to do more than just believe them. They need us to take action. They need us to demand resources and spaces for marginalized groups. They need us to treat them with respect and reverence. The changes we need to make at MSU will probably take generations - AND these changes can’t be made entirely on the backs of survivors. I challenge you to identify ways that you can be bold, do what is right, get involved and stand with survivors.