#HerToo

Middlebury College student faces discipline for Facebook list of accused sexual transgressors

BY MOLLY WALSH

T he #MeToo movement had already named and shamed Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, comedian Louis C.K., U.S. senator Al Franken and celebrity chef Mario Batali when Elizabeth Dunn decided she had something to say about her classmates at Middlebury College.

On December 12, the senior went on Facebook to post a short list of “men to avoid” at Vermont’s most prestigious college and solicited input from others. She added the crowdsourced names to her list until she had called out 36 male students and recent graduates for sexual misbehavior, ranging from serial rape to harassment.

Not all of the accusers were female. A few cases involved males or nonbinary students identifying men responsible for sexual misdeeds, according to Dunn.

Facebook removed the post within 48 hours, but screenshots of the list continue to circulate on campus. The incident gained national traction after it was covered on Babe.net, the same online outlet that published the much-debated anonymous account of a woman’s “worst night of my life” date with comedian Aziz Ansari. In its Middlebury story, the website that proudly claims to be “for girls who don’t give a fuck” and attend law school in the fall.

Like Ansari’s defenders, some say Dunn, 21, went too far: What began as overdue acknowledgment of a vast sexual harassment problem has devolved into unfair and unsupported charges against men. Middlebury may expel Dunn, and she is worried that sanctions by the college could derail her plans to graduate in May and attend law school in the fall.

But other observers see Dunn’s list as an act of bravery and, perhaps, desperation.

“There is an epidemic of sexual assault and everything else you can think of — violence, belittlement, discrimination, stalking, coercion — which happens on college and university campuses every day,” said Felicia Kornbluh, a feminist and associate professor of history at the University of Vermont.

Women have issued warnings about men for a long time, and Dunn’s list is a modern way to frame the message, Kornbluh said. It’s “like what we used to do with writing names on the bathroom wall,” she said. “It’s sort of the weapon of the week.”

The list is a reminder that many victims don’t feel they can trust in police or campus judicial systems to seek redress, Kornbluh said: “It’s a sign of our utter failure institutionally.”

Numerous students have shared stories with her of being victimized, she added. “It’s pretty ubiquitous, and I hear no stories in which people used the university or other judicial procedures and got relief. That basically never happens,” Kornbluh said. “So here we are. If I was an undergraduate, I might be writing on Facebook, too.”

Culture Shock

Dunn said yes to Middlebury four years ago without ever having seen the place. The Atlanta, Ga., resident picked the college in part because it is known for its foreign languages and offered Arabic, which she studied in the rigorous International Baccalaureate program at her public high school.

Middlebury also offered financial aid to cover most of the cost of her four-year education. The teen was too busy with exams at the time to take advantage of an invitation to fly up and visit. Dunn, whom her friends call Liz, turned down similar offers from Brandeis University, American University, and the College of William and Mary to come to Vermont.

Dunn was eager to get out of the South and experience a new culture, a new place. But the transition for the African American daughter of a single hotel housekeeper mom was “jarring,” as Dunn described it on a couch inside Middlebury’s on-campus radio station, WRMC 91.1 FM, on the second floor of Proctor Hall. (She hosts a weekly program, “Cannabis Feminist,” that explores “the intersections of marijuana, feminism, race, class and the prison industrial complex.”)

The mostly white, mostly wealthy and very sports-oriented school culture at Middlebury was indeed unfamiliar.

And, like many new college students, Dunn found herself navigating social situations for which she was unprepared. One night during her first year, she attended a party, met a guy and went to his room. According to Dunn, the student, a senior, plied her with alcohol to the point where she was “very drunk.” They had a sexual encounter even though Dunn now says she “didn’t really know what was happening” and “didn’t really consent to a lot of what was happening.”

Dunn tearfully explained that, the next day, she knew something terrible had occurred but didn’t want to fully admit it to herself. She never reported the incident to police or campus judicial officers because she did not want to face humiliating questions that “chip away at you” and blame the victim, she said.

But she came to view the encounter as a sexual assault. And late last year, inspired by the #MeToo movement — and the “Shitty Media Men” list circulating online with claims about professionals in that industry — Dunn accused the student in her December 12 Facebook post that quickly grew into a list of 36 men. She revealed only his first name and encouraged other students to direct message, aka “DM,” her on Facebook with the names of their abusers. She promised to add them to her list.

“The messages just started pouring in,” Dunn recalled, adding that she was surprised by how many students wanted to share their experiences of being victimized by harassment and sexual assault. “There’s just a lot of collective pain and trauma that people have experienced here,” Dunn said of Middlebury College.

Before Facebook took it down due to complaints, the post listed the offenders — almost all by both first and last names — along with various accusations after
each one, from “serial rapist” to “emotionally abusive” to “treats women, especially black women, like shit.”

Dunn’s post ended with these words: “here's to not being complicit in 2018 and feel free to dm me more names to add to this status because I could really give a fuck about protecting the privacy of abusers.”

All of this happened as students were preparing to leave campus for the holiday break. Before she headed home to Atlanta, Dunn got a call from a campus judicial officer asking to meet. Initially, the purpose seemed to be to offer her comfort and support as a victim of sexual assault, Dunn said. But then the officer, whom she won’t name, asked her to identify and provide contact information for those students who gave her the names of the men on the list.

Dunn said she refused to cooperate because she had promised to protect the privacy of the victims; she has since deleted all of their messages. Then, last week, Dunn said she was summoned again to meet with Middlebury judicial officers. On January 17, they told her she was officially facing college discipline for violating the privacy of other students — that is, those individuals she outed on the list.

“I could be facing suspension or expulsion. Middlebury judicial affairs has refused to take anything off the table right now,” said Dunn, who is majoring in gender, sexuality and feminism studies. The possibility that she might not be able to finish at Middlebury is sobering, she said, but she still feels she did the right thing.

“This harm is being done by, like, specific people and by specific individuals, and if we want to move toward a conversation about, like, healing and accountability and growth, there needs to be some acknowledgment that harm was done,” Dunn said. “So I think that the list was collectively generated not only by me, but by a pretty large group of survivors. It was like taking a moment to say, ‘This is our experience. This is what happened to us.’”

Men About Campus

Students weren’t eager to speak to this reporter about Dunn or her list on a snowy afternoon last Thursday. More than half a dozen males declined to comment on the record about the controversy, but each was aware of it. The roster continues to circulate, they said, because so many people took screenshots of the post before Facebook pulled it down.

“For someone to just post a name, post an allegation and not have anything to back it up, it’s hard to respect that,” said a male first-year student on campus who did not want his name used. Others said the post “freaked” students out but triggered necessary conversations.

Samantha Valone, a Middlebury sophomore from the Boston area, said it was a good thing to call attention to sexual violence. But, she added, “I just kind of feel bad for some of the people who were maybe accused and are innocent, because their lives are pretty rough right now.”

The range of misdeeds, alleged or real, also varied widely, she noted, from emotional abuse to the much more serious “serial rape,” and “they maybe shouldn’t have been put on the same list,” Valone said.
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After Facebook took down the list, some students decried the decision online and even accused the social media giant of being complicit in sexual assault, observed Nathaniel Wiener, a Middlebury College senior and a reporter for the student newspaper, the Middlebury Campus, which published a December 23 story on Dunn.

But other students immediately felt the list was unfair and still do, Wiener said last week. The controversy comes on the heels of another Middlebury mess that went national last March, when student protesters shut down a talk by The Bell Curve coauthor Charles Murray and injured a professor in the process.

Dunn helped organize that public demonstration, too, calling Murray’s race-based theories about intelligence deeply offensive. On November 13, she took part in a “performance activism” piece in front of Proctor called “Laurie’s Big Apology.” Students in cheerleading getups waved metallic pom-poms as they lamponed Middlebury president Laurie Patton’s effort to respond to continuing protests around the Murray event during a town-hall-style meeting she had convened a few days earlier.

To see the college headed back into the headlines over a new scandal upset a number of alumni, according to Wiener. Some reached out to him to ask about Dunn’s motivations with the list. “My answer was, ’I don’t know,”’ said Wiener.

It didn’t help that immediately after the social media blast, the college issued emails to the student body that appeared to the people she reported on ...

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ALEC ROSE

Justice or Witch Hunt?

This is not the first time social media has been used in a campus sexual assault allegation. Alec Rose is a Santa Monica, Calif., attorney with a national practice that specializes in college assault cases. He’s not representing anyone accused young men.

One of his clients was recently cleared in a campus judicial review process, and the alleged victim chose not to appeal but later tweeted the young man’s name with the accusation that he was a “rapist loose on campus” and that the college was whitewashing that fact, Rose said.

“It was very devastating for the young man,” and he withdrew from the school, according to Rose, who declined to release more specific details.

Meanwhile, the accuser could have channeled her anger into an appeal, he added. Using social media as it was in that case, and in others, can be deeply unfair, Rose said: “I think it’s a dangerous way for somebody to seek redress, both to them and the people they are accusing.”

He had a similar reaction after reading the story about Dunn’s list on Babe.

“Without knowing that she had substance to back up her accusations against these 30 young men, I don’t know how this could be deemed responsible,” Rose said, adding: “It’s certainly very humiliating to the people she reported on ... It may be a situation where some of them may not be able to recover their reputation.”

Dunn said she considered the risk that someone would sue her for defamation of character when she posted

“My immediate reaction to that is no,” Luna said. Historically speaking, sexual assault has “been a grossly under-reported crime,” and victims have not felt able to go to the courts for many reasons, Luna said.

“There’s a whole laundry list of reasons why an individual will not report, will not disclose,” Luna said. “Some of those examples are the fear that no one will believe them, embarrassment. A lot of sex assault victims blame themselves.”

Luna said one teenage victim he worked with wasn’t fully aware she had been violated. “She didn’t really know what rape was,” he said.

Back at Middlebury, Dunn is waiting to see how the college disciplinary process treats her. Her friends are petitioning against punitive action, and Dunn is applying to law schools.

She said she isn’t concerned that her activism could adversely affect her chances of getting in. Her plan B: landing a job in the Bronx public defender’s office.

Dunn has heard nothing from the man she personally accused and has never directly told him how she felt about the evening. Does she think he would view the incident as sexual assault? “Probably not,” she said. “And that’s another thing that is really typical here.”

Men are sometimes raised to ignore social cues and feel a sense of entitlement, while women may be socialized not to say no or to accept things so men feel more comfortable, suggested Dunn.

Reactions from men on the list haven’t all been negative. Some of the accused have “glared” at Dunn in the dining hall or said “not very nice” things, she allowed. But others have approached her to discuss the allegations and even said they wanted to create a forum for broader conversation.

Tyler McDowell, a junior from Pennsylvania, was accused on the list of making “fetishistic, racist, sexual comments about black women.” He doesn’t remember making such comments and does not know who claims he made them, McDowell told Seven Days.

Still, he doesn’t feel he was treated unfairly. “I do not feel wronged by this. I also would stipulate that other men probably shouldn’t, either,” said McDowell.

The list was a “wake-up call” that should trigger discussion about the need for an end to the behaviors that were described on the list, he added. It’s “one way of broadcasting kind of a general call for culture change.”

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