A SILENT CRISIS

Sexual assault against boys is far more common than we think. Here's why we don't talk about it.

BY EMMA BROWN
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The Senate had been scheduled to work late on the night of Monday, Nov. 7, 1983, but was able to adjourn at 7:02 p.m. Now the 600 rooms and miles of corridors in the seat of American democracy were silent and nearly empty. At 10:48 p.m., a Capitol switchboard operator fielded a call. “Listen carefully, I’m only going to tell you one time,” said the caller in a recorded message. “There is a bomb in the Capitol building. It will go off in five minutes. Evacuate the building.”

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principle in Washington. The latest expression of that fear would be a permanent fence that officials are now thinking of erecting around swaths of the Capitol grounds.

The 1983 bombing was committed by the May 19th Communist Organization, M19, a women-founded and women-led band of underground militants with a core of about 10 members. They took their name from the birthdays of Malcolm X and Ho Chi Minh. Some had been members of the Weather Underground or other radical groups. After enduring the macho arrogance of male-dominated radical culture, the women of M19, with a couple of male comrades, charted their own path.

The group was tied to eight bombings from 1983 to 1985 in Washington and New York, and other crimes. Anonymous messages from the bombers railed against the U.S. interventions in Grenada, Lebanon and Central America. “They wanted to literally make a boom and to draw attention to their cause,” says historian William Rosenau,

“It’s indefinite,” a Capitol Police spokesman said after the West Steps of the Capitol were closed in 2001. “We never like to say permanent.” But of course it was permanent, as new security measures almost always are.
From left: Workers place traffic barricades across from the White House in 1995, when the area was closed to traffic after the Oklahoma City bombing, Sen. Mack Mattingly (R-Ga.) surveys the damage caused by the Capitol bombing in 1983. Photographs from left by Mark Wilson/Associated Press/Shutterstock and J. Scott Applewhite/Associated Press

whose revealing chronicle of M19 and its deeds, “Tonight We Bombed the U.S. Capitol,” was published last year.

The FBI eventually caught up with the group. In 1990, three members pleaded guilty to charges related to the bombing. In 2001, President Bill Clinton commuted the sentence of Linda Evans. Laura Whitehorn was released in 1999. Marilyn Buck was paroled in 2010 when she was terminally ill with cancer.

The Capitol — and Washington — would never be the same. The day after the 1983 bombing, House and Senate leaders agreed to restrict the people’s access to the people’s branch: Public entrances would be cut from 10 to four. Metal detectors would be installed at the public entrances. Tourists and lobbyists would no longer be allowed in the corridors outside the House and Senate chambers. Such restrictions had never been deemed necessary despite two previous bombings — in 1915 and 1971 — and the volley of shots fired by four Puerto Rican liberation militants from the House gallery that wounded several members in 1954.

From then on, significant episodes of violence often prompted increased fortification and diminished public commons. After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Pennsylvania Avenue NW was closed to traffic in front of the White House. Later, on the other side of the White House, E Street NW was closed, too. Now, even tourists on foot are barred from the sidewalk next to the South Lawn fence, where people once flocked to admire the most iconic view of the White House.

In 1998 a gunman forced his way into the Capitol and killed two Capitol Police officers. The tragedy prompted Congress to greenlight a plan to build a vast underground Capitol Visitor Center to funnel tourists through one entrance set apart from the Capitol itself. Scores of trees had to be removed from the park-like grounds designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

In 2001, after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the anonymous mailing of anthrax spores to congressional offices, the majestic outdoor West Steps and upper west terrace of the Capitol were closed. Washington lost a favorite gathering place to watch fireworks, listen to concerts and admire the best view of the National Mall. “It’s indefinite,” a Capitol Police spokesman said of the closing at the time. “We never like to say permanent.” But of course it was permanent, as new security measures almost always are.

Which brings us to the seven-foot-tall black fence circling the Capitol grounds today. It went up after the insurrection and was supposed to be temporary. But last month acting Capitol Police chief Yogananda Pittman called for permanent fencing. Local officials are pushing back, but authority rests with the House and Senate sergeants-at-arms, the Architect of the Capitol, and Congress, which would have to appropriate the funds. (Capitol Police and both sergeant-at-arms offices didn’t respond to requests for comment.)

Those entities may have the final say, but really, terrorists and criminals have been the unsung co-signers of every blueprint to enhance security and reduce public access since the 1983 Capitol bombing. I can’t help thinking of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, every time I walk on the pedestrian block of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. Osama bin Laden gets credit for closing the West Steps. And if this new fence stays in place, it will be another indelible feature on Washington’s landscape — a monument to the Proud Boys, QAnon and #StopTheSteal.

The city’s residents haven’t given up on preserving the humanity and good faith that define our civic crossroads and symbols of democracy. Hill resident Allison Cunningham has gathered more than 12,000 signatures on an online petition to prevent a permanent fence. “I would hate for a permanent fence to show the insurrectionists of January 6th that they won in any way,” she told me.

Uwe Brandes, faculty director of the Urban & Regional Planning Program at Georgetown University, is one of the few who’ve been part of a successful effort to dial back a security perimeter. As a city planning official in D.C. in the early 2000s, he helped create the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail, which required getting the Washington Navy Yard to grant public access to its waterfront. Brandes says there’s always a way to meet the needs of both security and access, if drastic decisions aren’t made “in a hasty, post-event setting.” “The grounds of the Capitol were designed explicitly to be a place of convening for the general public,” he told me. “To eliminate public access to the grounds of the Capitol would be a grave mistake.”

Rep. Austin J. Murphy, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, had it right after he sprinted from his office in the Rayburn Building to survey the damage on the night of Nov. 7, 1983. “I think we definitely have a security problem,” he told reporters. “The only alternative is to wall it off like the Kremlin. We can’t do that. In a free country, you’re free to come in and out of your Capitol.”

David Montgomery is a staff writer for the magazine.
Just Asking

“It’s important for us to be clear-eyed and speak out about the darkness that has enveloped our party.”

Rep. Adam Kinzinger

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPH BY KK OTTENSEN

U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, 43, is a Republican from Illinois. He recently launched Country First, a PAC to move the Republican Party away from the influence of former president Donald Trump.

You are one of 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach President Trump and the first Republican member of Congress to support invoking the 25th [Amendment] after Jan. 6. What were you thinking when you made those decisions?

Basically, the second Donald Trump tweeted that this is what you get when you steal an election, two or three hours after the insurrection started, I realized he was just unfit to be president. He wasn’t even managing the federal government, wasn’t defending the Capitol. We [didn’t] have true leadership at the helm. So that was my decision with the 25th Amendment.

When impeachment came up, I didn’t think it was the best thing to do because it just gave Donald Trump an opportunity to be a victim, and he’s really good at being a victim. But I knew that if it was put in front of me, there was no choice. It was, frankly, an easy decision.

Did you think that more members would join you than did?

I thought we would have had more than 10 on the day of the impeachment. But a few days before, I would have been impressed with 10. Every day the waves were switching back and forth. I think if it was secret ballot, it’d have been a ton.

How do you explain the gap between members’ private opinions and public stances?

Political pressure. It’s fear of Donald Trump. Because there’s no doubt you’re not going to get through a primary having voted for impeachment without some hard work and explaining. To some extent — and I don’t blame anybody for their vote, unless they were intentionally misleading people — there was an argument to be made that if your district wants you to vote against the impeachment, you should vote against the impeachment. That is a legitimate position of the role of representation. But I think you were elected to be out here with judgment and you had to swear an oath to protect against foreign and domestic enemies.

Even after the Jan. 6 attack, a majority of House Republicans voted to overturn election results later that very night. Was that a surprise to you? And did that vote change anything for you?

It was not [initially] a surprise, only because I’ve been here long enough to know what litmus tests for conservatism end up turning out to be, and how, in many cases, people will just vote a way because it’s the politically easiest way.

[But] after the insurrection, to still see the number on the second [objection] was more surprising and more angering than the first time. To come out of that and see people like Matt Gaetz [R-Fla.] on the floor blame antifa and that kind of stuff was actually very angering. And what it changed for me was realizing that, even in the face of something like January 6th, there was not going to be an organic awakening [in the party] to what was happening. It was going to take people being outspoken and telling the truth — and maybe at great cost.

How much do you think it is people actually believing the election was not legitimate?

I don’t think really there’s many people that believe that. A lot of them, it’s avoiding pain. The ones that kind of have kept their head down, it’s more a matter of: I’ll just do what I need to do to get through and hope that there’s an organic change to the party. But there’s a few I’d put in a little more of the exotic caucus in the Republican Party. For a lot, it is an opportunity to fundraise and get famous immediately. Marjorie Taylor Greene — nobody knew her name until fairly recently. And now everybody does. So it’s the easy path. And you can be well loved in your base and secure your reelection for eternity. That, I think, is what drives at least a lot of the outspoken folks.

It’s important for us to be clear-eyed and speak out about the darkness that has enveloped our party, or else, you know, there’s no reason to be out here fighting.

KK Ottesen is a regular contributor to the magazine. This interview has been edited and condensed. For a longer version, visit wapo.st/magazine.
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Both took time to set the (Zoom) scene

It’s been 25 years since I’ve had a date,” said Victoria Mantyla, 51, a psychometrist in Ashburn, Va. “It’s been four years since my divorce and my dad — he’s 83 — said, ‘Start dating now, before you get too old and ugly.’ I was like, ‘Thanks, Dad!’ I should’ve said, ‘I’ll attribute that comment to dementia.’ ” She recounted this with a laugh but, in all seriousness, she admitted to feeling the pressure to “start doing it now before things go downhill.”

The New Jersey native said she’s “pretty Type A” and needs “someone to balance that. Someone calm, gentle, empathetic and sensitive.” And she wants them to share her hobbies like biking and a “love of nature.”

We set up the dating newb with a Date Lab second-timer, Michael Pointer, 54, a labor union communications specialist living in Silver Spring, Md. When we reached out to gauge his interest in another setup, he told me that he didn’t want to look like someone “craving attention” and thought it over for several days before saying yes. He’s still seeking a woman who is “accomplished” in her field and has a great sense of humor. “An outgoing personality is a turn-on,” he wrote in his application last year.

Michael said virtual dating is “necessary in the world we live in” but he finds it cold and hard to get a read on someone, so he put some time and thought into the items placed behind him, hoping the background would give insight into his personality. The display included a St. Louis Blues Stanley Cup mug, the book “Caste,” and Bruce Springsteen’s autobiography. The background, he said, “told where I came from, what my interests are, where my values are.”

Victoria took care with her setup as well: “I had my fireplace on and jazz music in the background — a pretty and cozy atmosphere.” To give it a restaurant feel, she set her table with fancy plates, a nice glass for her wine and a candle.

The experience was the push Victoria needed. “The fact that this was her first date in 25 years made quite an impression on him — Michael’s first impression of Victoria was that “she was attractive and seemed comfortable and enthused, which I really appreciated.”

The fact that this was her first date in 25 years made quite an impression on him: “I told her, ‘You’ve got some guts jumping into Date Lab!’ I was impressed. I said, ‘Man, you know it’s in The Washington Post, right?’ That jumped out at me that she was adventurous.”

Victoria said Michael was “relaxed, outgoing and social,” which made her feel very comfortable. However, she felt a lot was “lost in translation” because Michael’s camera was pretty close to his face. “You can pick up so much with the body language. I wanted to ask him to lower his camera a little because I couldn’t see his hand movements. He was pretty much neck up,” she said. “So things didn’t feel natural in that sense. I didn’t want to ask him to back
up. I thought that would've been awkward.”

Over the next two hours, they chatted about sports, work, kids and where they grew up. Victoria liked Michael’s Midwestern type of personality. “I find that guys from the Midwest are really down to earth, nice and family-oriented,” she said. (Michael is originally from Missouri.) He enjoyed hearing about Victoria’s childhood in New Jersey and how she and her friends would skip school to hang out by Springsteen’s house in the hopes of catching a glimpse of him.

“I thought there was a good back-and-forth. I was pleasantly surprised because I’m usually the one asking all the questions — whether it be because of my profession or my personality,” she said.

But Michael thought he was the “dominant force in the conversation,” asking most of the questions. “As the date went along it felt like she was not asking me questions,” he said. “I like a woman who gives it back to you a little bit and has a strong opinion as well.”

As they wrapped up the date close to 9 p.m., Michael gave Victoria his number. “There is a method to my madness,” he explained. “I wanted to see if she was interested in reaching out to me.”

The experience was the push Victoria needed to get back on the dating scene. “I thought if he wasn’t my type that I’d be disappointed and give up, but I feel the opposite. I think I’m ready for this again. I wanna jump in before I get too gray-haired and wrinkly,” she said laughing. “My dad said, ‘Why don’t you check the obituaries for widowers?’”

RATE THE DATE
 Victoria: 3.5 [out of 5]. “I asked him about his hobbies and he didn’t say much, so I don’t think there’s a connection there. I’m pretty active, so I need someone who can keep up with me.”

Michael: 4. “I admire her sense of spirit and think she’s pretty interesting, but I can’t tell if there was chemistry. It felt like there was a lot of dead space during the date.”

UPDATE
Victoria texted Michael the next day, and a few friendly messages were exchanged. However, they made no plans to meet again.

Vijai Nathan is a writer and comedian in Washington.
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STORY BY EMMA BROWN / ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACQUELINE TAM
raising a boy sometimes feels like traveling in a foreign land. When I gave birth to my daughter, three years before my son was born, I had no idea how to be a mother. But after decades of navigating life as a woman, I knew unequivocally what I wanted for her: to see herself as capable of anything, constrained by none of the old limits on who women must be and how they must move through the world. She could be fierce and funny and loving and steely-spined.

“I am strong and fearless,” I taught her to say when she was 2, as she hesitated on the playground, her lips quivering as she considered crossing a rope-netting bridge strewn 10 feet above the ground. There was nothing premeditated about that little sentence. It just appeared on my tongue, distilling what I wanted her to be and how I hoped she would think of herself.

I had no such pithy motto for my son. Reminding a boy to be strong and fearless seemed unnecessary and maybe even counterproductive, fortifying a stereotype instead of unraveling it. What could I give him to help him ignore the tired old expectations of boys? I had no idea. I didn’t know how to help him resist the stresses and stereotypes of boyhood, because I had never grappled with the fact that boys face stresses and stereotypes at all.

But of course they do. Boys learn that they’re supposed to be tough and strong and sexually dominant, according to a massive study of gender attitudes among 10- to 14-year-olds in the United States and countries across four other continents. Girls learn that they’re supposed to be attractive and submissive, according to the study, led by researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

The global script clearly harms girls, who face disproportionate levels of sexual violence, not to mention greater risk of early pregnancy and leaving school. But Robert Blum, a physician who has studied adolescents for 40 years and is one of the Johns Hopkins scholars leading the study, wants people to understand that it also hurts boys. “The story about boys has yet to be told, and I think it’s a really important story,” Blum explained to me. “Our data suggest that the myth that boys are advantaged and girls are disadvantaged simply isn’t true.”

The movement for gender equality has often focused on empowering girls. But as Blum sees it, achieving gender equality also requires attention for boys. They too need to know they are not circumscribed by ideas about who and how they should be.

Boys are more likely than girls to die in their second decade of life, and they use more alcohol and tobacco, habits that erode their health as they age, Blum said. But even more troubling, Blum’s team found that boys suffered higher levels of physical violence, neglect and sexual abuse by adults than girls. And the more a boy was victimized, the more likely he was to do violence to others.

Those findings should serve as a gut punch. We can’t solve the problem of violence against girls and women without also addressing violence against men and boys. And we won’t succeed in teaching our sons to care for other people’s bodies until we learn to care for theirs.

The first I heard of “brooming” was in one of those interstitial moments, a busy day on pause, waiting for my car to be repaired at an auto shop before racing to work. It was pouring outside, so I huddled along with a half-dozen other harried customers in a small room where a television blared a local news show. Five boys, football players at a high school just outside D.C., had been charged with rape and attempted rape in the alleged attacks of their teammates with the end of a wooden broomstick.

Not only had I never heard of such a thing, but I had never even imagined it. Raped with a broomstick? Long after I left, I was still trying to wrap my head around it, and as details emerged in the following days and weeks, I could not look away.

It had happened on the last day of October, Halloween, at Damascus High, a diverse public school with a powerhouse football program in Montgomery County, Md. My colleagues at The Washington Post, where I work as an investigative reporter, reported the wrenching details of the attack. Freshmen on the junior varsity team had been changing in a locker room after school when suddenly the lights went out, and they could hear the sound of someone banging a broomstick against the wall. The sophomores had arrived. “It’s time,” one of them said. They went from freshman to freshman, grabbing four of them, pushing them to the ground, punching, stomping. They pulled the younger boys’ pants down and stabbed the broom at their buttocks, trying — and at least once succeeding — to shove the handle inside their rectums. The victims pleaded for help, the attackers laughed at them, and a crowd of other boys looked on, watching the horror unspool.

Whenever I learn of something unconscionable, I find myself looking for clues that it could never happen to me or the people I love. That’s human nature, I guess. But like any other kind of sexual assault, brooming is not a phenomenon confined to this one high school, or to any particular type of school or community. It cuts across racial and socioeconomic lines, shows up in elite private boys’ academies and coed public schools, in big cities and rural villages and small towns that dot the heartland.

What do you think you know about boys and sexual violence? I thought I knew that boys are victims only rarely, and I automatically equated “child sexual abuse” with adults preying on kids. But I was wrong on both counts.

Many boys are molested by adults, that’s true. But there are strong signs that children are even more likely to be sexually abused or sexually assaulted by other children. In one study of 13,000 children age 17 and younger, three-quarters of the boys who reported being sexually victimized said the person who violated them was another child. In a little more than half those assaults, the violator was a girl. Most boys who had been assaulted had never told an adult.

Though sexual violence mostly affects girls and women, male victims are still astonishingly common. I was shocked to learn that as many as 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused during childhood. About 1 in 4 men is a victim of some kind of sexual violence over the course of his lifetime, from unwanted contact to coercion to rape. LGBTQ men are at greater risk than heterosexual men: More than 40 percent of gay men and 47 percent of bisexual men say they have been sexually victimized, compared with 21 percent of straight men.

In 2015, a national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 4 million men (and 5.6 million women) had been victims of sexual violence just in the previous year. More than 2 million of those men were subjected to unwanted sexual contact, and more than 800,000 said they were “made to penetrate” another person — an awkward term that doesn’t show up much in the media or in public debate. It means that a man was either too inebriated to consent or was coerced or threatened into sex.

Just as with girls and women, violation of men and boys can involve physical force or emotional coercion. Just as with girls and women, boys and men sometimes have sexual experiences to which they cannot consent because they are underage or blackout drunk — experiences that we might reflexively call sex but that we should really understand as assault. And though the perpetrators in those cases can be other boys and men, they can also be girls and women. The overwhelming majority of male rape victims say that the person who violated them was another male, but most male victims of other kinds of sexual violence say they were violated by a female.
Boys and men who survive sexual violence can experience serious psychological and emotional fallout, including post-traumatic stress, symptoms of depression and anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse problems and sexual dysfunction.

Yet we rarely hear about any of this on the news. We hardly ever talk about it. Stories of sexual misconduct are everywhere, but the tellers of those stories are mostly girls and women. The stories of men and boys still remain mostly hidden, unacknowledged and undisussed.

The default in discussions about sexual violence is to think of boys and men as perpetrators and women as victims. But that is an oversimplification that is built on a damaging stereotype about male invulnerability, and it obscures the truth: Boys can be victims, and boys can need help. We've just built a world that makes it hard for them to admit it — and for the rest of us to acknowledge it. If we want to raise boys differently, we must start believing that they are equally capable of feeling pain and doing violence.

When I first began learning about locker room assaults, I wanted to know what motivated a boy to hurt another boy in this way. But along the way, I became even more puzzled — and troubled — by the victims' experiences. They had so much difficulty identifying what had happened to them as sexual assault, and felt too much shame to admit they were hurting.

One boy was so distressed about the prospect of being attacked by his basketball teammates during a tournament trip that he called his mother, intending to ask her for help. As frightened as he was, when it came down to it, he couldn't bring himself to tell her what was going on. "I was going to tell her when I first got on the phone with her, but I ended up not saying nothing," he later said. "I was going to tell her, but I didn't know how to say that."

I'll call him Martin. He was a freshman on the varsity team at Ooltewah High School, near Chattanooga, Tenn. In December 2015, he and his teammates drove to a tournament in Gatlinburg, in the Great Smoky Mountains. They stayed in a cabin where there was a pool table downstairs in the boys' quarters. The coaches stayed upstairs.

By the fourth day, Martin knew the upperclassmen were coming for him. They had already gone after the other three freshmen; every evening, he had seen the brandishing of a pool cue and he had heard the screaming. He knew he was next; that's
when he called his mother. And yet he didn’t know how to ask for help without embarrassing himself and violating an unwritten code of silence. He just couldn’t get the words out.

Soon after the phone call with his mother, three of Martin’s teammates assaulted him. Even after the attack — which ultimately landed him in the hospital with a months-long recovery ahead of him — Martin did not immediately tell the truth about what had been done to him. He told his coach that he and his attackers had been “wrestling” and he insisted he was fine — until he peed blood, then collapsed and had to go to the emergency room. It was only because of his extreme injury that the truth came to light.

Later, during a sworn deposition, a lawyer asked Martin if the attack had to do with sexual orientation. Was the older boy gay? No, Martin said. It wasn’t that at all. “I feel like he tried to make me — belittle me,” he said. “Tried to make me feel like less than a man, less than him.” (I spoke to Martin’s lawyer but didn’t speak to Martin. This account is based on court records, media accounts and video testimony.)

The freshman intuitively understood and endorsed the argument that scholars make in academic circles: This kind of sexual assault has nothing to do with sex. It’s about power. It’s about older boys establishing their place at the top, putting younger players in their place.

This particular way of flexing power depends on the cluelessness or tacit acceptance of the adults who are paid to keep boys safe. It also depends on the silence of victims, who — like most teenagers — want desperately to belong, which means bearing pain, handling it and definitely not snitching. But it’s dangerous and unfair to expect boys to bear the responsibility for protecting themselves, Monica Beck, one of the attorneys who represented Martin in a lawsuit against the school system, told me. Boys, like girls, deserve the protection and help of their coaches, their teachers, their parents and their principals.

After Martin collapsed and underwent surgery, he spent six days in the hospital and nine months recovering, including relearning how to walk. One of the attackers was convicted of aggravated rape, the other two of aggravated assault.

Even with these horrifying facts, not everyone agreed that what happened to Martin should actually be considered sexual violence. The police officer who investigated the crime filed charges of aggravated rape, a crime that in Tennessee does not require sexual motivation. But he suggested in state court that what happened was not in fact a

Many boys are molested by adults, that’s true. But there are strong signs that children are even more likely to be sexually abused or sexually assaulted by other children.
sexual assault. It was instead, he said, “something stupid that kids do” that “just happened” to meet the definition of aggravated rape.

Later, Martin sued the school district for failing to protect his civil rights. As the trial approached, lawyers representing the school board asked the judge to prohibit Martin’s legal team from using certain terms in front of a jury: rape, aggravated rape, sexual battery, sexual assault.

The judge never had to decide, because the school district’s insurance carrier settled with Martin for $750,000, avoiding a trial. But it’s notable that this was even a potential issue of debate. Imagine that a girl was attacked as Martin was. Would anyone doubt that it qualified as a sexual assault?

Sports is a refuge for so many children and an engine for so much good. Kids can learn to communicate and depend on each other. They can learn to push and surpass their own athletic limits. They can learn to win, and to lose, with humility and grace. Kids who play organized sports tend to do better in school than kids who don’t, have stronger social skills and higher self-esteem, and are healthier physically and mentally, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

But as anyone who has spent much time on the sidelines of a youth soccer or basketball or football game can tell you, sports can also be destructive. Coaches and parents can be verbally abusive, teaching kids that winning is more important than integrity and that disrespect is part of the game. Kids can learn to prize the use of force and violence.

It’s this darker side of sports that turns it into a breeding ground for hazing, initiation rituals that older players use to belittle and humiliate junior teammates. For boys who find themselves on teams with such a poisonous culture, sports are not a refuge. They are a nightmare.

Over the past generation, hazing pranks that once seemed innocuous — think dressing up in silly costumes or singing an embarrassing song in public — have evolved, becoming increasingly dangerous and sexual, according to social scientists who study hazing and consultants to high school athletic teams. Sexualized hazing, some argue, is an expression of a narrow version of masculinity that is celebrated in sports — a version of masculinity that is not just about strength but about dominating at all costs, about hiding pain and enduring weakness, and about degrading anyone or anything that seems feminine or gay. Even as a growing number of alternative niches gives boys places to thrive as proud geeks and artists and gender nonconformists, many sports have remained staunchly macho in this way.

We don’t have comprehensive data on how common it is for boys to sexually assault other boys in the context of athletics. In 2000, researchers from Alfred University, a small private school in western New York, conducted the first national survey of high school hazing. They wanted to ask about sexualized hazing, but they were stymied. In those early days of the Internet, they had to send their survey out to students in the mail, and they got access to a database of student addresses only on the condition that they not ask any questions having to do with sex or sexuality. (In general, researchers have trouble getting permission to ask children under 18 questions about anything related to sex, sexual violence or abuse — which is understandable, but which also hobbles our understanding of kids’ experiences.)

Norm Pollard, one of the lead researchers on the Alfred University survey, found students’ replies to one open-ended question shocking. “They talked about being sexually assaulted at away matches, in the back of the bus and in locker rooms,” Pollard said. “It was devastating to read those reports from kids that were just trying to be part of a team or a club.”

Psychologist Susan Lipkins has studied hazing since 2003, when she traveled to a small town near her home in New York to interview the parents and coach of high school football players who had been sexually abused by teammates at a preseason training camp. None of the victims reported the abuse to a coach, a parent or any other adult. It came to light only because one of the boys sought medical help — and the cover story he told doctors to explain his injuries didn’t make sense.

She and other experts said they have seen noticeably more media reports and court filings alleging ritualized sexual violence among high school boys, leading them to believe that it is becoming more common and more severe. Boys tell each other and themselves that they are taking part in a tradition: This is what it takes to be part of the team, this is what it takes to belong. First you are assaulted; then you become a bystander, watching as others are brutalized; finally, you get your turn at the top, your turn to attack.

Boys who report being sexually assaulted face the humiliation of having to describe how they were violently attacked, to another person, and then they face what Lipkins calls a “second hazing” — a backlash of harassment and bullying unlike that heaped on female victims of rape. Lipkins noted that she has seen parents and students band together to protect their team, their coach, even local real estate values against allegations of sexualized hazing. “Communities support the perpetrators and say, ‘You’re a wimp, why did you report it,” she said.

As a result of all that pressure, she said, it’s common for boys to remain silent even after being assaulted. Not only do boys not want to tattle on their teammates, but they often don’t even recognize that they’re victims of an unacceptable violation and of a crime. No one has told them. “Hazing education is in the Dark Ages,” Lipkins said.

She believes that young people and adults, including parents, coaches and administrators, need much more training to recognize this kind of behavior as an unacceptable form of harm rather than a tradition to be upheld. And Lipkins believes it won’t end until groups of players stand up together to stop it, either as active bystanders who protect victims or as victims who together find the courage to speak out.

Of course, when they speak out, they need grown-ups to hear them and protect them. Coaches must understand that building a healthy team culture and guarding players’ safety are crucial parts of their job. And we parents must tell our boys the same thing we tell our girls — that their bodies are their own, that no one should touch them without their consent, that we will not tolerate violation of their physical autonomy.

Boys who are raped or sexually assaulted face a particular kind of disbelief. They may not be accused, as girls often are, of reinterpreting a consensual sexual encounter as nonconsensual. They’re perhaps less likely to be accused of straight-up lying, or of being crazy. Instead, they’re accused of taking things too seriously. Sexual assault? No! It was just messing around. Just a joke. Just boys being boys. Just hazing.

The language we use to describe what happens to boys helps feed the problem, argues Adele Kimmel, who has become one of the leading lawyers for male and female victims of sexual assault. “Terminology matters,” Kimmel, a wiry woman with jet-black hair, told me on a rainy day in downtown Washington at the sleek offices of the nonprofit firm Public Justice, where she is a senior attorney. “Some of these boys don’t even recognize that they’ve been sexually assaulted because it’s been normalized by the adults. They call it these euphemistic terms — they call it horseplay, roughhousing, poking, hazing. They don’t call it sexual assault. They don’t call it rape.”

Kimmel represented an Oklahoma middle school boy who was in
music class when one of his football teammates held him down and assaulted him. The principal called it horseplay but acknowledged in an interview with a state investigator that if the same thing had happened to a girl, he would have considered it sexual assault. The boy was branded as a tattletale for reporting what had happened to him and became the target of fierce bullying at school. His father asked for help. “What do you want me to do, hold his hand?” the principal said, according to the lawsuit the family later filed.

When we convey to boys that unwanted touch is a serious issue of sexual assault only when it affects girls and not when it affects boys, we are sending a message that only girls’ bodies are worthy of protection. That message leaves our sons vulnerable to abuse, and it presents them with a knotty question: Why should boys treat other people’s bodies with dignity and respect if their own bodies are not also treated with dignity and respect?

Violence prevention programs often focus on debunking rape myths about female victims. No, wearing a short skirt is not the same thing as consenting to sex. But they less often delve into male victims — particularly those men who are violated by women. The idea that a man would have to be forced or coerced into sex with a woman runs counter to our cultural scripts about how sex works. But that’s just another misleading stereotype, and one that makes it hard for boys and men to recognize and deal with their own experiences. By now, for example, stories about college campus rape have firmly established that some men assault women who are too drunk to consent. There’s no counternarrative about men being raped when they have had too much to drink — usually, that’s just called sex. But whether they consider it assault, men on campus can and do have unwanted sex. One student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology told me for a 2015 Washington Post series on sexual assault how uncomfortable he felt when he was pursued by a woman he wasn’t interested in. He found himself unable to say no to her persistent advances, even though he knew he didn’t want to have sex with her. “You don’t want to be rude,” he said. “You don’t want to be weird.”

College fraternities have a reputation for tolerating and even encouraging sexual violence against women, and there is some evidence that fraternity brothers are at greater risk than other college men of committing assault. But there is also other, perhaps less widely known evidence that fraternity members are at greater risk than other students of being assaulted themselves. In a study of fraternity men at one

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Midwestern college, more than a quarter — 27 percent — said that someone had had sex with them without their consent, either through the use of force or by taking advantage of them when they were drunk. But many people do not define a man pushed into nonconsensual sex as a person who has been sexually assaulted. A 2018 survey of 1,200 adults found that 1 in 3 would not quite believe a man who said he was raped by a woman, and 1 in 4 believed men enjoy being raped by a woman. There’s a belief that men cannot be raped because women aren’t strong enough to physically force them, and a conviction that straight men want sex so much and so consistently that they just aren’t that bothered by a woman who refuses to listen when he says no. These ideas are embedded in our institutions, from media to medicine to law to scholarship.

It wasn’t until 2012 that the FBI recognized that men could be raped. Until then, the bureau defined rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will.” Now it uses gender-neutral terms; rape is defined as “the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”

Scholars studying sexual violence have often asked men only about their own sexual aggression and women only about being violated, an approach that fails to acknowledge — much less measure — the existence of male victims, female perpetrators or same-sex assault. When researchers have asked about sexual violence in gender-neutral terms, they have made startling discoveries. One survey of 300 college men found that half had experienced some type of sexual victimization, and an astonishing 17 percent — nearly 1 in 5 — had been raped, meaning they had unwanted sex because they were threatened, physically forced or taken advantage of while too intoxicated to consent.

Lara Stemple, an assistant dean at UCLA School of Law, has focused her research on highlighting the large number of men who have experienced sexual violence and the institutional biases that have obscured their experiences. She told me that her efforts to bring attention to male victims — and to the surprisingly high rates of female perpetration of such violence — have at times triggered accusations that she is aligned with men’s rights activists, who are known for anti-feminist and misogynistic language and ideology.

But acknowledging the invisibility of men’s suffering does not mean dismissing or doubting violence against women. It is not one or the other. Both problems are tangled up in some of the same deeply ingrained notions about what it means — or what we think it means — to be a man.

The #MeToo movement has been built out of stories, one after the other, a flood that helped us see how men in positions of power abuse women and then keep their violence secret. In those stories, the world saw evidence of a sprawling problem in urgent need of solutions. Women found solidarity in acknowledging what had happened to them and in declaring that it was not tolerable and was not their fault.

Now boys need to hear more of these stories from men. Media coverage of high-profile cases of sexual violence against men and boys has helped open Americans’ eyes to the fact that the sexual victimization of boys is not just possible but deeply scarring, psychologist Richard Gartner, who specializes in treating male victims, told me. When Gartner began speaking publicly about male victims in the 1990s, he was often greeted with blank stares and disbelief.

But then came revelations about widespread abuse by Catholic priests, by Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, by Boy Scout troop leaders. Those stories forced people to begin to recognize the vulnerability of young boys. When actor and former NFL player Terry Crews came forward to say he had been groped by a male Hollywood executive, it forced people to consider the vulnerability even of strong adult men. And it made room for more boys and men to come to terms with their own experiences as victims of abuse, Gartner says: “Every time that happens, some boy somewhere says, well, if he can come forward, maybe I should be talking to someone.”

Perhaps it is starting to happen more often. Over the past few years, the women who came forward in droves to speak out about sexual violence were joined by men who said they had been abused, including allegedly by powerful, high-profile men such as actor Kevin Spacey and film director Bryan Singer. In one remarkable reckoning, more than 300 former Ohio State University students said they had been sexually abused by an Ohio State doctor, Richard Strauss, and sued the university for failing to protect them.

In 2019, an independent investigation commissioned by the university found that Ohio State officials knew of complaints about Strauss as early as 1979 but allowed him to continue practicing until he retired with honors two decades later. Strauss committed nearly 1,500 acts of sexual abuse, including 47 acts of rape, the university told federal authorities in 2019. The stories Ohio State graduates tell about Strauss bear remarkable similarity to the stories that hundreds of women told about the abuse they suffered at the hands of Larry Nassar, the former Michigan State University physician and former USA Gymnastics national team doctor. If the collective power of Nassar’s victims forced the nation to confront the ways in which institutions ignore girls and young women who report sexual assault, then the graduates of Ohio State may help force us to see how we have dismissed boys and young men.

For now, though, many men still see reasons to keep their stories to themselves. Gartner has written extensively about the shame, trauma and confusion that his patients struggle with as they try to make sense of how they were victimized. Many fear that admitting violation will be seen as evidence of personal weakness. They fear they won’t be believed. And they fear they were somehow complicit.

Boys who report assault or abuse need to hear from their parents and the people close to them that they are unconditionally loved. “The most important thing to say is, ‘I believe you, and it wasn’t your fault … and we still love you,”’ Gartner says. And parents who want to prevent their boys from being abused, he explains, should be telling their sons all the same things they tell their daughters about their right to control access to their bodies.

When we fail to recognize and address violence against boys, not only are we failing to protect boys, but we also may be stoking violence against women. These problems are to some extent intertwined: While most do not go on to lives of violence, criminality or delinquency, victimized children are at greater risk of doing harm to others.

If you had asked me, before I started this research, whether I believed that boys and men could be victims of sexual assault, I would have said of course. If you had asked me whether I bought into the notion that boys and men always want sex, I might have rolled my eyes: Um, no. But listening to the stories of male victims taught me that I didn’t completely believe what I thought I believed. I noticed my own knee-jerk resistance to the reality that unwanted sexual contact can traumatize boys just as it does girls — and to the reality that it can matter just as much to them. Deep down, somewhere under my skin, I was holding on to some seriously wrongheaded assumptions — ideas so ingrained I did not even notice them, ideas that rendered boys as something less than human. 

Emma Brown is an investigative reporter for The Washington Post. This article is adapted from her new book, “To Raise a Boy,” published by One Signal Publishers/Atria Books.
On a quiet evening in June, I planted a Black Lives Matter lawn sign on the village green in my hometown, Gilmanton, N.H., population 3,758. Then, as I crouched low in the grass, shooting a photo of the sign, I made sure that our town hall, the two-story white clapboard Gilmanton Academy, built in 1894, loomed large in the background.

Erected to house a long-vanished private school, the Academy building has, for the past three decades, been the civic soul of our town, which sits in New Hampshire's Lakes Region, amid piney forests and sheep pastures and rolling hills. Numerous Fourth of July dances have been held at the Academy, and once every four years we stomp the snow off our boots and file up the Academy's worn wooden staircase to take part in a local rite, New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary.

My plan was to use the photo to promote a Black Lives Matter rally that I'd be hosting in a few days on Gilmanton's green. I was allying with the decentralized racial justice movement, which decries violence against Black people, because I wanted to suggest that, even in a tradition-bound small town, change is possible. My neighbors have long baked pies for one another and run errands for the sick; I hoped that conscientious racial inclusion could come to be regarded as just another form of caring. But I knew that I was taking a
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controversial stance. In Gilmanton, as of 2019, 96.5 percent of the residents were, like me, White. In November, 57 percent of the voters here chose to reelect Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the political gap between rural and urban America continues to widen. According to Decision Desk HQ, a website focused on elections, voters in the country’s least dense counties picked Trump by a margin of 35 percentage points, up from 32 in 2016.

After I carried my sign home and announced the rally on the community Facebook page, the vitriol flowed in. There were over 300 comments in the first 24 hours. One of Gilmanton’s most outspoken Black Lives Matter advocates, a 32-year-old legal assistant named Grace Sisti, was being savaged in one of many side threads: “this whole virtue signaling stunt will turn this whole town against you,” wrote a woman named Rita Canole, whose children attended school in Gilmanton with Sisti. “Think this thru ... you have lived here your whole life and [will] probably spend the rest of it here. ... don’t make people remember you for this.”

“Grace Sisti is a radical leftist,” proclaimed another local, Rick Lucas, in a two-sentence post. “These are the facts!!”

My event listing was soon deleted, and I discovered why when I ran into the website moderator, who told me, “You were getting threats, and so was I.” I was a little terrified, but on June 20, when 90 people gathered on the town green here to mark George Floyd’s suffocation by lying in the grass for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, there were no counterdemonstrators. The only opposition came from a couple of hooligans who shouted sarcastic remarks as they sped by in a car.

Still, as the presidential election neared, the situation grew stranger. In October, one local conservative — Phil Wittmann, a selectman in neighboring Alton — took a swipe at me in a letter to our local paper, the Laconia Daily Sun. “While taking a nice Sunday drive through Gilmanton,” Wittmann wrote, “I passed a house where a man who used to be a reporter for the Arab Muslim News Service, Al Jazeera lives. ... On his front lawn he proudly displays a Black Lives Matter sign. Most people now know that Black Lives Matter is a Marxist organization bent on destroying the American family and way of life.”

Wittmann has a good memory. I’ve done some writing for Al Jazeera America, and in 2015, while I was covering a Trump rally in New Hampshire for the news service, he denied my request for a man-on-the-street interview. But how did he know where I lived? And how was I to stomach his letter’s scary suggestion that, amid the coronavirus pandemic, our rural county had become nothing but a constellation of isolates holed up in their respective homes, Googling one another as they lobbed decimating insults over the Internet?

I settled in Gilmanton in 2015, after being a lifelong summer visitor, guided by a belief that the place was, even compared with other New England villages, a sanctuary of idyllic beauty and calm. My ancestors have been coming here during summer since the late 19th century, and in writing a locally popular 1993 memoir, “Gilmanton Summers,” my grandmother, Jane Scriven Cumming, evoked a sweet antique world appointed by kindly, approachable neighbors. “Every evening at dusk,” she wrote, “old Mr. Valpey stood on a little ladder to light the lantern.”

For rural liberals like me, Joe Biden’s win certainly didn’t usher in a new era of sweetness and light. Belknap County, which comprises Gilmanton and 10 other towns, and is home to 61,000 people, proved itself the Trump-friendliest county in New Hampshire. All 18 of the politicians we just sent to New Hampshire’s very large state legislature are Republican, and before you call them New England moderates, consider that when the delegation met in December, in a small room, it made protective face coverings optional, in defiance of a statewide mask mandate. And delegation chair Michael Sylvia is pressing his fellow legislators to impeach New Hampshire’s Republi-
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I reach out to a few more of my local right-leaning critics, asking to meet for an interview. All of them ghost me, though, and eventually I have to recognize that the silence is stemming not only from what I've said and done but from who I am. I could never claim to be “from” Gilmanton.

My grandmother's book is still being reprinted by the local historical society, sure, and in the 1970s, when I was a kid, I spent scads of time here, swimming in Loon Pond and training for cross country on the back roads. Whatever patriotism that’s in me was shaped here in Gilmanton, at the Fourth of July parades, when the firetrucks paused in front of the Academy building and a deep solemn voice (was it the fire chief?) intoned, “Will you join us, please, for the singing of our national anthem?”

Still, I was just another affluent summer person when I was a kid, a flatlander from Connecticut. And after I finished college, in 1986, I spent nearly three decades living in Portland, Ore., a city known for its liberalism.

When I landed in Gilmanton I was single. But then in 2018 that, too, changed. I logged on to the dating app Bumble and found a public interest lawyer situated in the crunchy, left-leaning outskirts of Burlington, Vt. Michele is Mexican American. She told
me this in an early text, adding, “Trump calls us an infestation. It isn’t just that he doesn’t see us as humans. He is a corrupt, greedy, power-hungry man with no morals.”

On an early date, Michele explained how, in law school, she came across graffiti slurring minority students and then decided it was time to embrace her racial identity. She legally changed her last name. She’d grown up Michele Coker, but Coker was a name her father adopted for the convenience of having an American-sounding name. He was born an Olvera, and in 1995 Michele Coker became Michele Cristina Fontana Olvera.

Late last summer, Michele moved in with me, just in time to help stack firewood for winter, and now she’s running a few miles on Gilmanton’s back roads most mornings as she navigates the trickiness of being Latinx in lily White northern New England. When I decided to host that Black Lives Matter rally, I was animated in part by the alienation Michele sometimes feels here — and by the hopeful sense that our community could become richer, more robust and vibrant, if it grew more diverse.

But was there reason for such hope? In the years I lived in Portland, Gilmanton had, like so many American small towns, lost some of its neighborly cohesion. The Gilmanton Corner Store closed the year I arrived, and it had been a mainstay of the community for 75 years. During World War II, Gilmanton soldiers sent letters to the store so they could be posted on a community bulletin board.

The population of Gilmanton — 1,010 in 1970 — has nearly quadrupled over the past half-century. There have been no Fourth of July dances since 2003 when a vaunted volunteer organizer retired, and since 2018, the town hall has been locked during business hours. Visitors have to buzz at the door and then confer with clerks from behind bulletproof plexiglass. Septic permits are now a big deal in Gilmanton, and the zoning laws have gotten quite finicky.

There have been positive changes, too. Small farms are enjoying a renaissance here, and these days we’ve got a bustling farmers market on our rugged, granite-strewn hills that, on a cold winter’s night, he can spend hours outside tending to the livestock without ever donning a jacket. The old-timer looms large in local mythology, and when I finally land my first interview with a political foe, I’m not shocked to hear Dick Burchell, a 77-year-old former Belknap County commissioner, speak of old-timers. “The people I’m closest to,” Burchell says, “the people I tried to represent, they’re traditional. They’re hard-working and down-to-earth. They’ve never made a lot of money, and now the forces of our economy are tilted against them.”

As Burchell sees it, “There’s such an imbalance between these working-class people and affluent second homeowners. There’s a real difference between their local conservatism and a more global way of looking at things.” Black Lives Matter, Burchell believes, is a “myopic” organization that’s “fomenting violence” to serve a globalist agenda. “There’s some very powerful forces driving it,” he says, “Wall Street establishment types. Globalization works for them.”

We’re meeting in Burchell’s lavish modern wood house, which sits at the end of a long dirt road in Gilmanton Iron Works, a satellite village. It’s late on a November afternoon, and the light filtering down through the leafless maples lining Sunset Lake, just outside the window, is dim and gray. I’m masked and eight feet away from Burchell. Still, there’s a convivial feel to our talk, even though I’m painfully aware that we’re just two White guys talking about Black people. When I stepped into the half-darkness of Burchell’s living room, he quipped, “Welcome to the gloaming.” And now he’s canted back in his brown leather easy chair, a large, white-haired man in a green zip-up sweater. He’s in fragile health, recently treated for kidney issues, but still he’s expounding on his worldview in ruminative, deliberate tones.

“We’ve become increasingly fragile as a society,” Burchell continues. “The hypertension surrounding race these days is totally unnecessary. And what’s being ignored is that you can be marginalized in ways beyond race. There are people who’ve been here for generations, and they’re working two jobs and just getting by.”

Burchell isn’t one of these people, though. He moved to New Hampshire in the mid-1980s and earned a handsome living as a real estate agent. Then, late in life, he became an inveterate writer of letters to the Laconia Daily Sun. One of his most frequent targets is a Democratic politician, Ruth Larson, who in November lost a bid to become a state representative.

Larson, 72, is a lawyer and lifelong seasonal visitor who became a year-round New Hampshire resident in 2010. She’s an avowed Black Lives Matter supporter, a feminist and an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights. After Phil Wittmann attacked me in print, she bought an advertisement in the Sun to declare that his letter exuded “both bigotry and a complete lack of understanding of journalism. I count Mr. Donahue as a friend,” she continued, “and as an ally attempting to offer an alternative to the narrow and obsolete views of you and your allies.”

In his Sun letters, Burchell has called Larson “an extremist” and “screchy and preachy” and complained that she doesn’t believe in either the Bible or the U.S. Constitution. Now, in the gloaming, Burchell surprises me, revealing that he and Larson used to be friends — “when she first moved here,” he says, “before either of us got involved in politics.” He gestures across the lake, for both of us know that Larson lives on the opposite shore, a half-mile away. “My wife and Ruth have spent a lot of time together,” he says. “They’ve gone kayaking. Until covid came along, the ladies who live nearby would all get together on Tuesday nights and drink wine and rip at their husbands.”

Listening to this, I remember a letter Larson wrote to the Sun in early 2020, pre-pandemic, inviting Burchell and eight other conservatives who’ve lambasted her in print — “frenemies,” she called them — to join her for breakfast or lunch on the Democrat’s dime. Only one “frenemy” accepted the offer, and it wasn’t Burchell. Now, his demurral saddens me. There’s just a sliver of water between these two avid rhetoricians. Gingerly, I offer a proposal. “What if we got Ruth involved in this conversation?” I say. “We could just call her and ask her to come over.”

Burchell doesn’t warm to the idea. “No,” he says, shaking his head, “my sensibilities are nothing like hers. I was brought up to be respectful. I’m not a sledgehammer. Talking with Ruth, it just wouldn’t work.”

Two weeks after meeting with Burchell, I write Larson for a response. But by now Burchell’s health has worsened. He’s back in the hospital, and Larson elects not to comment. “I am quite friendly with his wife,” she explains, “and I want to be sensitive to her.”

Not long after that, Burchell passes away, a victim of renal failure. Larson expresses condolences by sending flowers to his family.
I settled in this little
town guided by a belief
in its friendly spirit,
and even now,
as our political divide
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glimmering at times.

Author Bill Donahue
For rural liberals like me, Joe Biden’s win didn’t usher in a new era of sweetness and light. Belknap County, which comprises Gilmanton and 10 other towns, proved itself the Trump-friendliest county in New Hampshire.
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All told, I write to 13 detractors. They’ve shown great swagger on Facebook, but now they’re ducking me, almost en masse. What’s going on? To be fair, I’m more or less ambushing them. An average of 350 million photos go up on Facebook every day. They’re public pronouncements, but almost none of them elicit a call from a journalist.

Paul Oman, an online epoxy salesman who scored 25 likes casting doubt on my September Black Lives Matter rally, declines my request for an interview. “I’m working my tail off and I want to keep a low profile,” he says.

When I reach out to a man named Scott Febonio, I expect a little more fire. Febonio’s profile photo captures him shirtless, his six-pack impeccable, and on the community page he’s positioned himself as the stone-cold voice of sobriety. When one local contested the notion that Black Lives Matter is a terrorist group, Febonio wrote, “when they show up and destroy your property and drag you out of your home you may think differently. Open your eyes its happening all over the country this is not up for debate.” Later, going after another Black Lives Matter supporter, Febonio typed, “please move...back to Mass.” Never mind that his interlocutor was a lifelong Gilmantonite.

In responding to my request for an interview, Febonio writes, “I don’t support mainstream media or news organizations that are corrupt.” He goes on to suggest that I “write an article about the corruption and Fraud that is occurring. Talk about the overwhelming evidence and demand this be investigated for the good of our country. I challenge you to stand up.”

Intrigued, I write back, wondering whether he is referencing the presidential election or a “wider pattern of fraud and corruption.” “Please don’t insult my intelligence,” he replies. “Have a good day.”

Eventually, I meet with Rick Notkin, a 65-year-old retired nurse and gun advocate whose vanity license plate reads B EARARMS. When I slide into the booth to meet him at T-Bones, a steakhouse in our county seat, Laconia, the restaurant is nearly empty. He has a 9mm Smith & Wesson holstered on his right hip — fully legal per New Hampshire’s open-carry laws. “Is that gun loaded?” I ask, trepidatious.

“Well, I hope so.” Notkin’s voice is cheery and gentle. “Because if it’s not, it’s really useless.” He tells me that, as a bespectacled Jewish boy growing up outside Boston, he was repeatedly bullied. For a while he thought the answer was Gandhian nonviolence. Then in college he happened to watch an old movie, “The Incident,” which sees an injured vigilante taking action against two thugs terrorizing passengers on a New York City subway car. The film’s hero, played by Beau Bridges, slams his plaster arm cast at one of the villains until he is unconscious. Watching it, Notkin was transfixed. “I thought back on all the times people beat me up and nobody did anything.”

Today, Notkin packs his sidearm each time he steps into Temple B’nai Israel, in Laconia. “There have been a lot of attacks on Jews historically,” he explains, “and on churches of many faiths.” His gun has spurred controversy at the synagogue, and personally I feel for his congregants. Then Notkin tells me that he spends 10 hours a week running the synagogue’s soup kitchen.

“Do you carry your gun when you’re ministering to the homeless?” I ask.

“I carry it all the time,” Notkin says patiently, “but that doesn’t mean I’m raring to shoot somebody. I’d use it only if I was threatened, or someone I love was. If I went to my grave never having shot somebody, I’d be fine with that.”

Our luncheon chat is doing what dialogue should do: It’s making me see my opponent as complex and human. But there’s a formality to it, a careful, distant tone, and it’s set a full 11 miles from my home. The place I care about most is the town that I live in. I want a spirited, uninhibited back-and-forth with a Gilmanton neighbor on the other side of the political fence. So I’m happy when I get a warm reply from local conservative Valerie Cote, whose Facebook screen name is Tocho A’Hagi. “Would not mind speaking about politics,” Cote writes. “Thank you for reaching out!”

Cote, 61, is a retired Air Force staff sergeant who spent 16 years as an iron worker. And, though we’ve never met, I’m familiar with her house, since it sits on a road I frequently bike on. A sign out front bears the silhouette of a gun-toting sniper along with the words, “If you can read this you’re in range!”

Cote is wearing camouflage pants as she greets me at the door. There’s an orange bandanna wrapped around her long, gray hair, and her white German shepherd, Makwa, is leaping joyously at her side. Maybe I’m supposed to feel threatened by the sign and the dog, but Cote is gracious in her own brusque, unrehearsed way. “Coffee?” she asks me, her smoker’s voice redolent of her native Boston.

“Coffee’d be great,” I say. “Cream, no sugar.”

I’d contacted Cote because she followed up my rally announcement with a post asking, “Are you tired of anti-law enforcement nonsense?” In her kitchen, though, Cote is charming me with her unabashed saltiness. In describing the old days in Gilmanton, she says, “We used to shut the lights off at night and just drive in the dark.”

She moved here in 1983, a decade after undergoing a turbulent identity struggle. Her great-grandmother was a Mi’kmaq Indian, and
When she was 16 she read “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,” Dee Brown’s unsparing account of White people’s mistreatment of Indians in the 19th-century American West. When her history teacher delivered a different rendition of what happened — “it was just ‘the Indians scalped everyone,’” as she remembers it — Cote initiated a heated argument and then abruptly quit school for good. “I slammed the door and broke the glass on the way out,” she says. “They were lying to me. I was done.”

With flourish, Cote had, like Michele, doubled down on her racial identity. And now I ask her if she feels any solidarity with the Black Lives Matter notion that historical wrongs must be righted.

“I can understand that people are a product of where they come from,” she says, “and the inner city, where drugs are available left and right — it’s a lot like an Indian reservation. But the question is, ‘How do you pull yourself up out of it?’ Charles Payne” — she’s referring to a Fox Business Network host who is Black — “he went to school carrying a briefcase when he was a kid. He got picked on, but he didn’t let that stop him. Look, white privilege exists only if you let it exist.”

Her toughness goes all the way to the core, I see now. It’s an ideology. And her husband, John Boutin, knows this. When he wanders into the kitchen, a stout, white-bearded man in black sweatpants, he makes a smirking reference to the warning sign on the lawn. “It’s not a joke,” he says. “Once, when a guy came here to talk to me about life insurance, she got her gun out.”

“I only shot in the air,” Cote says. “I didn’t even know who the guy was.”

“He never came back,” Boutin says, raising his eyebrow.

Days later, when I tell a couple of Portland friends about Cote and her warning shots, they’re horrified and suggest that, simply by communing with such a gunslinger, I’ve slipped over to the dark side. For me, though, what stands out is the delightful twists and turns of my 2½-hour meeting with Cote. It’s her telling me how she used to see her elderly neighbor, a farmer, sitting on his tractor “curled up like a burnt boot, but still out there every day. That’s the Gilman-ton that I don’t want to go away.”

It’s her telling me how she lets her old neighbor’s son, also a farmer, tap the maple trees in her woods for syrup. And it’s Boutin coming back into the room when we’re two hours in and saying, “This is a great conversation.”

Great conversations are rooted in courage and trust. We need them to keep our nation civil and stable, and during the past few weeks I’ve seen just how difficult it is to make them happen. Over and over, I’ve been stonewalled and reminded that a lot of people would rather say cruel things online than talk in person.

When I talk to my city-dwelling friends, they’re inclined to write off places like Gilmanton as unfortunate red splatters on the map — as places that should be visited only briefly, if at all, and only during the summer holidays. Many of the people who breached the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 were, after all, self-proclaimed patriots from small towns not too different from Gilmanton.

But I live here. I settled in this little town in the hills six years ago guided by a belief in its friendly spirit, and even now, as our political divide hangs on, as fraught as ever in the early days of the Biden presidency, I can still see that friendly spirit glimmering at times. On the day after Cote and I meet, she will post a picture of us, masked, on Facebook along with a note celebrating the good questions asked on both sides. One of my critics, an arch right-winger who said no to an interview, will applaud in the comments section with an emoji of an American flag.

As Cote and I keep talking, she pours me a second cup of coffee. There’s a happy, loose-limbed, neighborly vibe in the room as night falls outside her window. Squinting into the gathering darkness, I feel as though I can almost see old Mr. Valpey out there, lighting his lantern.

Eventually, when Cote and I say goodbye, she urges me to stop in next time I’m coming through on my bike. And I just might do that.
First things first. “Water?” he asks. We’re good with D.C.’s finest, which Richmond plucks from a tall safe doubling as a minibar. (Riggs was a well-known bank before it was a hotel.) Our guide introduces us to the remote for the TV, hands us the menu and asks us to exchange cell numbers with him, in the event he’s downstairs and we’re in need of more bread or an extra spoon. “I’ll always knock” before entering the room, he says. “Oh, one last thing,” Richmond adds before leaving with our drink requests. “Here’s the bathroom.”

Checking in for a new kind of room service

In the olden days — you know, before 2020 — chefs were judged primarily on what they put on a plate. Now, safety-conscious diners are just as invested in where the food is served. Since the pandemic, I’ve eaten in parking lots, greenhouses, tents, restaurants whose roofs can retract and streets converted into alfresco dining rooms. But it wasn’t until January that I checked into a hotel with the sole aim of eating dinner in a guest room whose bed was removed to make way for a table and chairs.

Welcome to the Riggs Hotel in Penn Quarter, where two of us have bypassed the dashing Cafe Riggs in favor of Room No. 307 upstairs. We’ve arrived sans luggage but with loads of curiosity as to how the night will progress. Our server turns out to be Michael Richmond, the hotel’s assistant food and beverage director, who greets us in the lobby, brings us to the elevator (“Mind if I ride with you?”) and escorts us to a guest room, where we settle into a linen-draped, lamp-lit table nestled between a headboard on one side and a large TV on the other.

Chef Patrick Curran inside one of 10 guest rooms that have been converted into private dining spaces at the Riggs Washington D.C. Hotel since December.

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I

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A loo of our own. That’s privacy.

Hotel occupancy in the United States plunged to 44 percent last year, a historic low, according to STR, a travel research company. One way some hotels have addressed the problem is to open their guest rooms to diners. Washington subscribers include Yours Truly in the West End and Sofitel downtown.

Riggs raced to introduce the amenity days before Christmas, when the hotel was poised to serve hundreds of patrons in its restaurant and D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser suspended indoor dining through the middle of January. “The last thing we wanted to do was ruin anyone’s holiday plans,” says executive chef Patrick Curran. His colleagues sprang into action, calling reservation holders with an alternative game plan, dubbed Cafe Riggs Upstairs, and readying 10 guest rooms on three floors for private, in-room feasting.

One of the early lessons: Diners spread across multiple floors is a headache for staff. Now, meals are delivered just to the third story. The hotel has also learned to anticipate guests’ needs. For the sake of efficiency, drinks can be preordered and extra bread might accompany the steamed mussels, says Daniel Pimentel, the hotel’s general manager. With in-room dining, a single oversight — the wrong wine — can be “a five- or 10-minute mistake,” since servers are apt to be out of view. To facilitate service, diners’ texts to their server are also seen by the bar, kitchen and front desk staffs. “It’s all about classic communication,” he says.

Forget checking in just for fries and beers. Riggs has a food and drink minimum of $125 per person, which helps cover the estimated $50 expense of disinfecting the room. While reservations are for two hours, “we’re flexible,” says Pimentel. For everyone’s safety, spaces aren’t rebooked for at least 24 hours. Guests can opt to have meals left outside their door, but that strategy feels too DoorDash for me. Part of the fun of going out to eat is the interaction, even at a distance, with staff.

Knock knock. It’s our first course at the door. Whenever I travel, I like to start the adventure with oysters, which my late friend, Seattle seafood maven Jon Rowley, advocated. Never mind that this particular trip involves a drive of only four miles from home and a short elevator ride to our seats. An iced platter of Savage Blonde oysters from Prince Edward Island, gently crisp and nicely briny, puts
us in vacation mode. We’re equally pleased with Curran’s silken sunchoke custard decorated with coins of the pickled vegetable. Finger-length rolls are reassuringly bundled in brown paper sleeves.

Richmond, who keeps his distance whenever he’s not serving or clearing dishes, sprinkles fun facts throughout the evening. To balance the masculine stone facade of the Riggs, the designers opted for comparatively feminine guest quarters, he says. “That’s why we call them First Lady and not Presidential suites.”

Knock knock. Entrees enter. Duck confit strewn across a bed of frisee with a trembling poached egg is dressed with a brown butter vinaigrette made tangy with grapefruit. Halibut poached in olive oil and perched on a little garden of sauteed fennel purple potatoes and preserved lemon underscores the chef’s affinity for acid — sparkle — in his cooking.

The beauty of supping in a guest room goes beyond the obvious ability to practice social distancing. Guests can play whatever music they want (let me suggest jazz with the roasted broccoli salad, brassy with garlic in its dressing) or catch a movie. Mindful of the two-hour reservation, my date and I were chaperoned by NBC’s Lester Holt, who delivered the day’s news. Back when we were squished inside dining rooms and people complained about noise and bar-stool hogs, I resented TVs in restaurants, considering them a distraction to food, service and conversation. Now? When two of you are under the same roof 24/7, an outsider can be welcome company.

A rap at the door signals dessert. We are happy to receive a slice of clafoutis, winterized with cranberry and pear, and a showy gateau Saint Honore.

Riggs plans to offer guest room dining “as long as demand is there,” says Richmond.

No one rushes us out the door, but I’m aware the clock is ticking as I push away from the table and prepare to leave what’s been a delightful evening out. I pause to inspect the bathroom. No big towels. And the closet is absent fluffy robes. To avoid unnecessary cleaning or extra touch points, Riggs has cleared the room of some hotel frills.

Later, I learn that the amenities are just a text away. “If someone wants a pair of slippers for dinner,” says Curran, Riggs can deliver the goods.

Clafoutis with cranberry and pear at Cafe Riggs.
Second Glance

Dino might

BY RANDY MAYS

Find the 12 differences in the photo of the Glory Days Antiques shop in Newburg, Md., in December.

PUZZLE ANSWERS
See them online now at washingtonpost.com/secondglance or in next week’s issue of the magazine.

SEE YOUR PHOTO
To submit a photo of the Washington area for use in Second Glance, email a high-resolution jpeg attachment of 8 megapixels or larger to secondglance@washpost.com. For information about our guidelines for user content, see washingtonpost.com/secondglance.
The answer to this week’s metapuzzle is a famous novel.

**ACROSS**
1. Book with the line “Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation”
2. Nonverbal agreement
3. “Please, I want to know!”
4. Make public, as an affidavit
5. Piece performed to honor an athletic victory (Malinda Lo)
6. Hard plant product
7. “Much ___ About Nothing”
8. Nickname of William Howard Taft’s birth city
9. Veinte divided by diez
10. Like dragon eggs in the “Game of Thrones” universe
11. Hoppy drink, briefly
12. Painting, pottery, etc.
13. “Ready to go?” reply
14. “Wisdom” director
15. “Neighborhoods” actor Zac
16. “A League of Their Own” co-star
17. Activist Jim whose Supreme Court case legalized same-sex marriage in America
18. Attorney’s letters
19. Parque das Ruinas city
20. Glutinous substance
21. Same-____ delivery
22. Subtext
23. Delivers a stump speech
24. “Woe is me!” feeling
25. Who plays with fire
26. Legal wrong
27. Divisive stage
28. Points at a dinner table?
29. Cites
30. Pro who’s no longer on a rookie contract
31. Has qualities
32. “Mo Bamba” rapper
33. No longer shining, say
34. Needing a friend
35. Usable
36. Trash trait
37. Like a bug in a rug
38.莫 Bamba’s apt asset
39. “All That” star
40. Online magazine that hosts the LGBTQ podcast “Outward”

**DOWN**
1. Transformative stage
2. Like a bug in a rug
3. On the matter of
4. Halle Berry’s zodiac sign
5. “The Fifer” painter
6. A grooming salon
7. “Inside voices!”
8. Constitutional conferral
9. “C’est la ___!”
10. Savings vehicle, briefly
11. Five-in-a-row board game
12. ___-socialism (ideology involving green politics)
13. Playwright Clifford
14. Howard Taft’s birth city
15. Veinte divided by diez
16. Like dragon eggs in the “Game of Thrones” universe
17. Hoppy drink, briefly
18. Painting, pottery, etc.
19. “Ready to go?” reply
20. “Wisdom” director
21. “Neighborhoods” actor Zac
22. “A League of Their Own” co-star
23. Activist Jim whose Supreme Court case legalized same-sex marriage in America
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40. Needing a friend

**SOLUTION**
1. Book with the line “Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation”
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**HINT**
For the solution to last week’s puzzle, see page 30. Online: Classic Merl Reagle Puzzles at wa.po.st/classic-merl.
My first hit was on Sam.

We’d seen her shivering in a muddy construction site, in the middle of a thunderstorm, scared stupid. She’d broken free from a crude tether made of twine; some still remained, noose-tight around her neck. She was brown-black, like a Rottweiler, but after a long bath it turned out she was Wiffle-ball white. She was a Samoyed, hence her name.

Sam lived with us and a parrot named Matthew. They despised each other. Matthew would fly to our mantel, pick up in his talons a small soapstone bear, fly over Sam and drop it on her head. In retaliation, Sam would pee in front of Matthew’s cage, trying to frame him for the crime. They were not bright, but they were canny.

Sam liked to wear fancy necklaces, the flashier the better, and strut and preen like Marlene Dietrich in “The Blue Angel.” Matthew liked to join us at the dinner table, where he had free rein. He’d waddle over to inspect our plates and pick out what he wanted. His favorite was mashed potatoes, which he’d stick his head into. When his head came up, he looked like Santa Claus.

Sam died in 1975. She’d reacted badly to a vaccine, trembling and unconscious. As they always do, the vet said dubiously that we could try heroic measures, but ... and I said no. It wasn’t about money, it was because this animal was in agony. I asked the vet if I could push the plunger, and he let me. It was my way of taking responsibility.

Matthew went a few years later. He was in his cage. I was rubbing his neck — he loved that — and suddenly he was upside down, hanging from his perch. I laughed. I thought he was playing with me, until he fell. I drove at breakneck speed to the only avian vet in the county. She told me he was dangerously anemic. For three days we fed him oxygen, and there was no improvement. “We could keep trying ...” the vet said, but I gave the kill order.

Then there was Clementine, the overweight chocolate Lab who lived with us and Harry, the young, lithe, un-fancy yellow Lab who looked like a baked potato. They loved each other. Clementine was the only dog I ever knew who was deliberately funny. She’d pin me to the bed and lick my mouth until, exhausted from defending themselves, my mouth muscles became flaccid and I spoke comically, thorta like thif, and the whole family laughed. I gave the kill order to the vet after Clementine’s liver gave out and she began puking chunks of blood. When we got home without her, Harry bayed, walked over to the exact spot she had thrown up, and peed on it. It was his way of saying goodbye.

Harry was next. His hind legs became useless. I carried him from the car to the vet. He weighed 90 pounds, and it threw my back out for a week. I didn’t mind. The very last thing he did was kiss us.

Next up: Mattingly, my daughter’s sweet pit bull, whom we were taking care of. Her legs also gave out, and when I tried to pick her up with my hands under her belly, they scrabbled frantically against the floor. Murphy came over and bit me. Not too hard, but it left dents. She had evidently thought I was hurting her pal. Horrified at what she had done, she ran away and hid. I had to coax her back and explain she was a good girl.

With the famously unconscionable Barnaby the cat, the vet called at 4 a.m. saying his bladder had burst and he had gone into cardiac arrest, and they were performing CPR, and did I want ... “Let him go,” I said, quietly.

I know this column is disturbing, but I am writing it for a reason. Often, well-intentioned people let animals linger too long, painfully long. They think it is for the animals, but it is really to postpone their own grief. Euthanasia, when it is warranted, is the last, best gift we can give our pets.

You know where this is going, of course, and I won’t belabor it. My most recent hit was on Murphy, a funny, quirky, indomitable dog whom I’ve written about countless times. For the past year climbing stairs became an enormous chore for her. She’d look around every single time to make sure there was no alternative, then sigh, steel herself, and barrel up the stairs on spindly, uncertain, trembly legs. She did this every night, merely to sleep in the same room as us.

She was 14 1/2 and had had 5,292 good days, and one ghastly one. When they wheeled her in with the shunt already in place, she gave us a look, her mouth filled with pain, her eyes filled with fear. I believe she was saying: “Please.”

I said to the vet: “Go.”

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