

Rape awareness should grow, Anne Arundel County exec tells Spalding women

To view a slideshow of Anne Arundel County Executive Laura Neuman speaking to students at Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn Feb. 27, navigate the arrows. (Photography by Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff) To view the Catholic Review Smugmug gallery, [click here](#).

By Maria Wiering

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SEVERN – “What do you see when you look at me?” Anne Arundel County Executive Laura Neuman asked the high school girls watching her on stage. “I know I’m old enough to be your mom or your grandma. What else do you see?”

The girls, students at Archbishop Spalding High School, called out compliments. One said she like her hair, another her sweater.

None said they saw a victim of rape, the reason Neuman, 49, was standing on Spalding’s stage Feb. 27. For the next hour, she shared her story of rape and overcoming her fears with junior and senior girls.

“A lot of people look at me and have this impression of who I am,” she said. “They think, oh, she’s a successful business person. ... What I want you to take away from this conversation is that your life is entirely your choice. You get to decide who you want to be in this world.”

Appointed to Anne Arundel County’s highest position last year, Neuman was raped at age 18 by a home intruder. Nineteen years later, in 2002, her rapist was convicted. Neuman’s message to the girls, both as a rape victim and businesswoman, was to persevere.

Neuman told the students that something she remembered hearing in high school that may have saved her life: Get out alive.

Her rapist broke into her apartment while she was sleeping. She woke up to a pillow over her face and a gun to her right temple. She didn’t fight him because she feared she would die, she said. She never saw his face.

She called the police and was examined for a rape kit, but neither the police nor her family believed her story, she said. It was not investigated. It took her years to move past the attack, she said.

Then, 19 years later, she asked the case be reopened.

Demand for justice

Neuman's rags-to-riches story is locally well known due to her recent Anne Arundel County appointment. She grew up poor in East Baltimore, her bedroom a hallway shared with two siblings. She dropped out of high school before her senior year because she didn't have transportation. She got her GED and went to community college, but quit when she couldn't pay tuition. Despite these setbacks, she had high aspirations, and eventually entered the business world, starting at \$7 an hour. She briefly attended the then-College of Notre Dame in Baltimore while climbing the corporate ladder.

By the time she was 30, Loyola University of Maryland was courting her for its MBA program and waived its undergraduate degree requirement to enroll. After graduating from Loyola, she completed the Stanford University School of Business' executive program and turned around a failing technology company, making a fortune in the process.



Anne Arundel County Executive Laura Neuman (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Despite her success, her rape weighed on her, she said. She was afraid to be alone at night. She wanted justice, and this time she wanted to be taken seriously.

At her insistence, Baltimore City police reopened the case in 2002, and three days later identified her rapist, Alphonso Hill, by a fingerprint match.

The night before his arrest, Neuman made a "pact with God," she said.

"I said God, if I can have this, I will do anything I can to help anyone else who's gone through this tragedy," she said.

When Hill was arrested and convicted, she was determined to hold up her end of the bargain. She established the Laura Neuman Foundation to increase public awareness of a crime she said happens too often and is talked of too little. The word "rape" makes people uncomfortable, she said, but speaking out against it makes people take it seriously.

Neuman also shared her story with 48 Hours, which resulted in seven new rape charges against Hill from Baltimore County women. Neuman suspects there are many, many others, perhaps as many as one per month for 30 years.

'The unvarnished truth'

A mother of two young children, Neuman has directed some of her advocacy at colleges, where one in four women is a victim of rape, she said. Most are instances of date rape.

Neuman urged Spalding's girls to trust their gut, stick with friends at parties, and know their personal intimacy boundaries and demand they are respected by others. If they are raped, she told them to contact police immediately, not to shower or disturb the crime scene, and to take photos of the scene if possible.

Neuman's presentation was ripe with maxims for personal success, championing hard work, believing in oneself and seeking new challenges.

Her words were well received.

Junior Kacey Elman, 16, called her "inspiring" and said her story was important for high school girls to hear.

Seniors Courtney Strength and Madison Garey said they had been advocating for a presentation addressing rape because of widespread misconceptions among their classmates. Strength said Neuman exceeded her expectations.

"The strength she shows as an individual is phenomenal," she said. "One of the most important things she talked about is how it's so important to take a stand. She's right. There's such a stigma in today's society (about rape)."

Garey, 18, said Neuman compelled her to work for greater awareness of the problem of rape.

Spalding President Kathleen K. Mahar said Neuman's honesty and candor served the students well.

"It's information they have to know; they're going on to college," she said. "Her story was incredible. Her willingness to share that - really intimate details of her life - it was the unvarnished truth."

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