

LONG ISLAND

Millennial activists on Long Island: Franklin Square's Elizabeth Osowiecki

The education coordinator at The Safe Center in Bethpage teaches lessons around Long Island about consent and has helped give power back to sexual assault survivors.



Elizabeth Osowiecki at The Safe Center in Bethpage, where she works as an education coordinator and rape crisis counselor, on Dec. 21, 2017. Photo Credit: Rachel Weiss

By Rachel Weiss

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Editor's Note: Newsday selected six millennial activists who go above and beyond to fight for the causes they care about. We are highlighting their hard work on Long Island and, in some cases, on a national and international level. Do you know a millennial in your community who advocates for an issue they care about? Email rachel.weiss@newsday.com.

Elizabeth Osowiecki is "The Consent Queen."

Osowiecki, 23, gave herself the nickname while working at The Safe Center in Bethpage as an education coordinator and rape crisis counselor. The non-profit offers support to victims of domestic abuse, child abuse, rape and sexual assault.

"I pretty much preach about consent," the Franklin Square native said. "That's definitely my favorite thing to do."

This cause is personal for Osowiecki, who said she was a victim of sexual assault while attending SUNY Purchase. Osowiecki said she at first felt reluctant to speak about her experience.

"I can see how you can go on with your life just trying to pretend that it never happened," Osowiecki said. "I did come forward, and I was able to get right into the activism, kind of taking on my story in that way rather than -- at that point -- letting it break me. And trying to use it as my voice."

Osowiecki said part of her job involves keeping up-to-date on the growing allegations of sexual misconduct against some of the country's most influential men. She thinks the #MeToo movement has been valuable for many survivors of sexual assault, but isn't always an option for those with stories to tell.

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"There is some pressure within society that now it's the brave and strong thing to do to come forward, which it is but ... sometimes you physically can't come forward depending on who hurt you," she explained.

"So that's why I just let people know that it's always their choice and there's no right or wrong way to do it. The people who are coming forward are strong, and the people who aren't coming forward are strong."

At SUNY Purchase, Osowiecki urged her peers to take a stand against sexual violence and educate themselves about consent. She was an intern for the school's Leadership and Bystander Intervention program, which is run through the counseling center.

Catherine Van Bomel, one of the school's licensed clinical social workers, advised her during this time. She remembers Osowiecki's ability to "engage people without being a nuisance," often approaching peers with ease, bearing literature about her cause.

"That's risky," Van Bomel said, "and she's willing to take that risk."

After graduating in 2016, Osowiecki vowed to help survivors like herself. She started at The Safe Center as a hospital advocacy volunteer following 30 hours of training. Osowiecki was on call for 12 hours at a time throughout her week and assisted sexual assault victims in hospitals.

"I really just try to make them feel okay and feel safe," Osowiecki said. "How I do that is trying to give them their power back in certain ways. Any of these issues -- sexual assault, domestic violence -- it's all about stripping someone of their power and their identity. So the simplest things of just asking or reiterating what the doctor said. When they say, 'We're gonna do this,' I'll ask [the victim], 'If they want to do something, is that alright with you?'"

During her volunteer work, Osowiecki realized she wanted to help in a different way: "I felt like I needed to do something before these people were ending up in the hospital."

Now as an education coordinator at The Safe Center, Osowiecki visits Long Island schools, workplaces, libraries, and even homes to teach lessons on topics including consent, healthy relationships, bystander intervention and gender norms. She leads these lessons out in the field nearly every day, either as presentations in classrooms or as state-mandated trainings for teachers and other professionals.

Osowiecki sprinkles bits of her bright personality and sense of humor into her lessons when appropriate as a way to make them accessible, especially for high school students. She also helps run the social media accounts for The Safe Center, and hopes they can develop into their own resources for survivors in need of support and information.

Social media is "a new platform of activism," she said. "People are using Instagram pages as their therapy."

Between working in the office and teaching around Long Island, Osowiecki has noticed that the people recently calling The Safe Center for help seem more empowered to speak about their experiences.

"Maybe people who felt they could never say 'Me, too,' now really feel like they can," she said.

“[They’re saying] if that person can, I can. That’s what’s great about it, where they’ll call and say, ‘I feel like I’m doing the right thing now.’”

Osowiecki finds one of the most valuable things an ally can do to support survivors is to just listen.

“When someone is telling you their story, people think that’s the time to decide if it’s true or not, in that moment when they’re telling you that they’ve been raped,” she said. “You can talk about it and think about it later. In that moment, just be there for that person. And that’s all you can do.”

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