



NORTHWEST GUARDIAN



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Authorized newspaper of Joint Base Lewis-McChord · Wednesday, May 28, 2014 7:41 AM

Assault, violence experts speak at SHARP summit

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Published: 03:20PM May 22nd, 2014



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Dr. Carolyn West, a psychology professor at the University of Washington, Tacoma, and a nationally renowned expert in the study of sexual violence, speaks at the JBLM SHARP Summit May 16 at the McChord Club and Community Center.

JOINT BASE LEWIS-MCCHORD The JBLM Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Summit was held at the Club at McChord Field May 16.

The ballroom was filled with sexual assault response coordinators, sexual assault prevention and response officers, victim advocates and key leaders, who learned how they can help address the problem of sexual harassment and assault in the military.

The theme was "Understanding the environment to change the culture." The summit featured Christine Altendorf, the director of the Army's SHARP program, as well as guest speaker, Dr. Carolyn West, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, Tacoma and a nationally renowned expert in the study of domestic violence and sexual assault.

West said victims of sexual violence often try to bury the traumatic experience, but it's like sinking the Empire State Building in Crater Lake.

If someone did, the building would be completely submerged and wouldn't be visible poking out from the surface.

"You think you're coping fine, you're functioning well, you're getting to work and doing your job, and you think you're doing a good job of hiding the trauma."

But Crater Lake is also a very clear lake and you can see a long way down in its waters. The Empire State Building would be plainly visible once you were up close.

“So I explained to my students that trauma really is both visible and invisible. You think you’re doing a pretty good job of hiding it, and you may for a while, but in a lot of ways that trauma is still very visible.”

In addition to two speakers, the summit featured three panels: the victim and the environment, the offender and the environment, and the prevention of sexual assault, best practices, and lessons learned.

In the first panel, attendees listened as a survivor of sexual assault shared her personal story, interspersed with frequent pauses as she wiped tears from her eyes.

The survivor emphasized the message that not all traumas leave a mark.

“I may not have a combat patch on my arm, but I’ve been fighting my own war against the culture of America and our Army for a long time,” the survivor said.

Understanding the victims of sexual assault is an effective way of helping them become survivors, said Patti Jo McGill, a victim advocate with the Installation Management Command. She said the most important thing a victim advocate can do is believe the victim.

Having an approachable SARC or victim advocate is a huge advantage in addressing cases of sexual harassment and assault, said 7th Infantry Division SAPR Lt. Col. Celia FlorCruz, because the victim will feel more comfortable coming forward and may come forward when forensic evidence can still be gathered.

A lack of forensic evidence is a recurring problem in the criminal investigations, said Special Agent Sarah Fonville, an agent with the JBLM Criminal Investigation Division.

Understanding the offender is also an important factor in prevention, as the next panel made clear.

Leaders learned to identify factors in the environment that could lead to sexual harassment and assault.

One of the key factors that lead to sexual assault is an atmosphere of sexual harassment, Fonville said.

Addressing an atmosphere of sexual harassment is also a key target in the Army’s strategy to prevent sexual assault.

One of the most effective ways of changing the culture is by working from the bottom up instead of the top down, said Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Lanza, I Corps commanding general.

“This is not a Beltway solution,” Lanza said. “This is about leadership. This is about leader development. This is about force protection. It’s about doing those right things that inculcate the values we want to have in our Soldiers.”