

Community

## **SAFE Men Project off to good start**

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It can be a challenge for men to talk about delicate topics, especially those concerning a majority of women. At Laramie's own SAFE Project, a program called SAFE Men has been introduced to teach men about how to treat issues such as sexual and domestic violence.

In 1974, two groups in Laramie formed. One consisted of nine female law students to raise awareness and provide education material to women regarding rape in the Laramie and University of Wyoming communities. The second was a group of feminists who organized around family violence issues and raised money to help women and children get away from abuse. In 1977, the two came together under the name Sexual Assault Family violence Educational Project, better known as SAFE Project.

Through the years, SAFE Project developed into an organization that is able to help provide women, children and men with the necessary support after events of assault or abuse. Livvy Gerrish, the outreach coordinator, developed a program to help educate men about these strongly gendered issues, and give them both a voice and the ability to do something positive.

“The SAFE Men Project was created in the wake of men in my personal life coming and saying, ‘This is a huge problem — gender-based violence, sexual assault, domestic violence — and I don’t know what to do with it,’” Gerrish said. “‘I don’t know what to do about it, I don’t know what my involvement is, and I don’t want to make it worse.’ I heard this repeatedly, over and over again, and it was at a time when there was a lot of sexual assault coverage in the news and the media. People were upset about it, but a lot of men in my life felt that they didn’t know what to do without making it worse and didn’t know what their role was.”

After attending a conference, Gerrish developed the idea for a program that would empower men to take their roles in ending gender-based violence in the community. A group of men would be designated SAFE Men, a group that knows about gender-based violence, knows how to change it and knows how to support survivors. Gerrish wanted the year-long program to be part educational, part project-based, as the SAFE Men meet up once a month to learn about a new topic and discuss it. At the end of the year, the SAFE Men will have completed a self-directed project to promote awareness of issues surrounding gender-based violence.

Jason Svare, one of the SAFE Men and an academic advisor and mental health counselor at UW, said the monthly meetings and their topics, while difficult to talk about, were very informative.

“We meet once a month, and we’ll go over (a) dedicated topic,” Svare said. “For January, it was intimate partner violence, March was stalking, April was child abuse. At the start of the training, Livvy gave us a binder with a bunch of information about the different topics, so we read through that and then we’ll come and discuss what we read. ... (S)he always has extra facts and figures and statistics that we can discuss, too.”

While learning about these things is important, Gerrish said it wouldn't really be effective unless the SAFE Men were able to help share their newfound knowledge with others – which is why the self-directed projects are an important part of the SAFE Men Project. The SAFE Men Project is not yet halfway finished, but some SAFE Men have already started to develop ideas for their own initiatives.

Don Babbit, an instructor at WyoTech, said he was interested in helping raise funds for those escaping abusive situations, needing money for places to stay, transportation and essentials.

“I think I'm probably going to try and do some kind of a fundraiser with my students,” Babbit said. “I want to try and help and have them help raise money to help in those areas. That's my thought right now, and only time will tell. Maybe things will change, but that is the kind of thing I would like to do.”

The SAFE Men this year had to be nominated by someone in order to be a part of the program, such as Laramie Police Department case detective Sgt. Taun Smith. Smith was nominated by his immediate supervisor, Lt. Mark Augustine, who also sits on the SAFE Project Board of Directors.

“When my lieutenant brought it up to me and told me about the program, I was excited about it because it kind of fits in with some of the other things I'm doing in the course of my employment at the Laramie Police Department,” Smith said. “I've worked at the LPD for 15 years, and currently as the detective sergeant, I'm a part of the Laramie Sexual Assault response team, which the SAFE Project is also a part of. This was just kind of an added thing to that, so I felt like it was a great opportunity for me to get involved. And I felt as a law enforcement officer for 15 years in this community, I felt like I had a lot to bring to the table for the program, given my knowledge and experience in working with victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, so I felt that I could bring a different perspective to this group of men.”

The SAFE Men Project welcomes men of various backgrounds and knowledge of gender-based violence. Gerrish said she hoped to see the program continue after this year, as did several of the other SAFE Men. Gerrish said she was glad to have such a good group of men for the first round, and hopes to have as many good members in the future.

“Once they are in the program, they are SAFE Men alumni forever, so they will always be considered SAFE Men,” Gerrish said. “Starting in December of this year, we will be interviewing new SAFE Men for 2020’s SAFE Men program.”

For more information about SAFE Project and the SAFE Men program, go to [www.safeproject.org](http://www.safeproject.org). There is also SAFE Project’s new podcast, “The Tip of the Iceberg,” at [www.thetipoftheiceberg.podbean.com](http://www.thetipoftheiceberg.podbean.com), featuring Faryn Babbitt and Gerrish.

### At a glance

Several local men are participating in a program where they have discussions about issues surrounding domestic and sexual violence. SAFE Men's leaders hope the knowledge gained by the participating men will disseminate through the community.