

MAKING A DIFERENCE; IT IS UP TO YOU

By Gary Cogan - *Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Manage*



Standing, wearing a button badge, with your head slightly bowed might not seem like a radical action. Refusing to handle grapefruits is hardly the stuff of revolution. The people who took those actions made a choice. They took small, simple, steps to support others. They acted to address injustice, not with huge demonstrative displays nor acts of rebellion. They were bystanders who witnessed the violence of systems, and cultures, that oppressed others. They took the decision to not stand by passively. Instead, they became active bystanders.

Peter Norman was a bystander. It might seem ridiculous to describe anyone standing on an Olympic winner's podium as a bystander. He was. So was Mary Manning. A 21-year-old shop assistant who chose to not be a passive bystander, but to take positive action. Both are now celebrated internationally for their actions in support of others. Do you know their stories?

Norman was an Australian sprinter. His second place in the 200m final in the 1968 Olympics saw him share the podium with African American athletes John Carlos who finished third, and Tommie Smith, the gold medallist. As the Star-Spangled Banner was played Smith and Carlos raised their gloved hands in protest. Norman, the bystander, was not a member of the Olympic Project for Human Rights to which the Americans subscribed. He did however know about the upcoming protest. Indeed, it was his suggestion that Smith and Carlos share one pair of gloves, each raising the opposite hand. He had also asked for a OPHR badge to wear. Carlos was to later remark that he had expected to see fear in Peter Normans eyes. Instead, he believed he saw love.

Mary Manning's actions were not as public as the Olympic winner's podium when she took them. Few people would have noticed, except maybe the woman trying to buy the South African fruit, and the manager who was subsequently called when Mary refused to handle them. A trade union directive protesting apartheid, It was the first act of a strike that has inspired books, plays, street names, and songs by Ewan McColl and Christy Moore. This act of defiance, in a shop in Dublin in 1984, would lead in 1987 to a complete ban of the import of South African goods into Ireland. This act, the first by a western government, was a major blow to the apartheid regime. Separated by decades and oceans these two acts were joined by a simple understanding. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Their discomfort at taking action, was outweighed by their refusal to stand by and watch. In those moments, they chose to become active bystanders. They didn't take the agency, nor drown out the voice, of those who were the targets of the violence they witnessed. They simply stood with them. Their actions demonstrating a conscious decision to do the right thing. Most of us will never get the chance to change the world in such dramatic ways. We will, almost certainly, get the chance to change the world for somebody experiencing violence, injustice, intimidation, or sexual violence.

Almost 7 in 10 college students will experience sexist remarks. 1 in 4 staff members will hear sexualised comments. These comments are often heard in company. They are a real problem. Dismissing them as banter, complaining that no one can take a joke anymore, is a problem. Language matters. Words matter. Othering people, because of their race, gender identity, sexuality, or any other inherent feature of their person, matters. Most importantly, your decision matters. Do you stand idly by? Or succumb to the peer pressure and laugh along. Are you passive? Or do you become an active bystander and take steps to show solidarity with the person who is the target of this unwanted, and unwarranted, attention? There is unlikely to be any medals. Nor recognition. Instead, there will just be the knowledge that you will have made a difference. There in that moment. Perhaps that ripple will echo on a far different shore.

We know that trivialisation leads to victimisation, to degradation, to the removal of autonomy. They all form the foundations that allow explicit violence to exist. Your decision to call out trivialisation and victimisation will chip away at the building blocks of violence against the other. That small change in tone, that expression of what we value, is the start of the move towards ending interpersonal violence. If the person to stand up, is you, and you want to know how to do it safely, check out the Bystander Intervention course on Moodle.

Bystander Intervention is a resource aimed at helping you prevent sexual misconduct you may witness. Its skills will help you change the story for your friends in so many other ways. The course is online, self-directed, and will take about three and a half hours to complete. Importantly, it is free to MU students. Bystander Intervention is a programme that provides training, and other resources, on how to safely speak up, step in, and support others. It is designed to address sexual violence, but it will give you tools that you can use in all areas of your life.

Never Passive is a promise we can all make.