

# Rites of Spring//Complacency

Posted on

May 25, 2017 by stairssite

“I’m sorry that they hurt you.” the owner of Champlain Valley Alpaca Farm told us, after threatening to call the Sheriff on us as we tried to protest Rites of Spring.

We were standing on the gravel road trying to convince him to let us protest on the property, even if only for 10 minutes. We were in various states of undress, as has become the norm when we protest. For a bit of context if you’re not already familiar with Stares and Stairs: we’re a sexual assault performance art protest group that originated out of a j-term class, but have continued to protest because of how strongly we feel about combatting rape culture. Our goal is simple enough; disrupt dangerous spaces, especially parties, where unhealthy and predatory behavior reinforces a culture of sexual violence. We try to bring an awareness to these spaces that wasn’t there before, and remind people that sexual assault does in fact happen here. We’ve protested at various locations (with varying levels of pushback) but this time we wanted to perform at a party that is the symbolic center of toxic masculinity, wealth disparity, and whiteness at Middlebury; Rites of Spring.

There are quite a few articles about secret frats, why they’re dangerous, and why they really shouldn’t be a thing, so I won’t get into that in this article, but trust me when I say that they kinda suck for pretty much everyone who isn’t a straight rich white man. We figured out when Rites was and how to get there, but once we showed up the property owner refused to let us enter the party, even as he expressed sympathy with our goals. It was painful, because on many levels it was clear that he agreed with us and cared deeply about the issue of sexual assault-but doing the right thing doesn’t make money, does it?

Ultimately, the reason we were barred from protesting is because unsafe, unhealthy, white male dominated spaces are profitable. Secret frats have access to massive amounts of both social and financial capital-the cover charge for Rites of Spring was \$40, the annual dues are even more costly, and the price of their privilege is the safety of almost everyone else, especially women, queer people, and people of color. A venue that usually hosts weddings and school dances isn’t going to jeopardize the considerable amount of money they were undoubtedly being paid. I understand that people have to survive somehow in capitalist societies-but we need to question our complicity within these systems when our survival depends on the exploitation of others. The line between doing what you have to do to survive and reaping personal rewards from participating, however passively, in rape culture, is much thinner than most people like to pretend that it is.

It’s not about us being hurt personally-it about us trying to address a systemic issue that, although it may have affected many of us, also fucks up the lives of an untold number of other

people. Perhaps it's actually better to risk something, money if it means that we're starting to dismantle these dangerous systems.

I want to re-emphasize that although it would be very easy to blame the unhealthy culture at Middlebury entirely on rich white men, the hundreds of students faculty and staff who are quietly complicit with rape culture also need to be held accountable. How much more effective would stairs/stares be if even 10 more people got involved? How many traumatizing situations could be avoided if we cultivated a culture of consent and looking out for each other? What would our campus look like if more people confronted the predatory behavior that they've observed in friends and acquaintances? Even more-so than active perpetrators, people who are complicit form the backbone of rape culture and we need to shake ourselves out of this apathy if we want to create a safer environment.

PS: I am deeply grateful for the group that participated. We were able to form a supportive community of people under stressful circumstances-one thing I deeply appreciate is how much we managed to laugh. From running over a wild turkey (rest in peace) to joking about how suspicious of a group we were, we managed to keep a sense of levity that's hard to find in activist spaces. I'm thankful to ya'll for caring enough to actually risk something ❤️

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