

EDUCATION

The Campus Rapist Hiding in Plain Sight

Daniel Drill-Mellum assaulted multiple women before he faced any consequences for his actions. Why didn't they come forward sooner?

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KEN WOLTER / SHUTTERSTOCK

He was blond and handsome and charismatic, and in his first two years at the University of Minnesota, Daniel Drill-Mellum had become a frequent and boisterous presence at frat parties. Laura, a rising sophomore, became friends with Dan her freshman year. She knew he had a reputation for being “touchy” with girls, but she was sure he was harmless. Laura trusted Dan. When she crashed on a couch in his fraternity house, Sigma Phi Epsilon, on July 18, 2014, she believed she was safe.

Laura had been drinking throughout the night. She realized only when she woke up some time later, partially dressed and pinned under Dan, that she had been moved to the fraternity’s coatroom. Dan was raping her. “He asked me if it felt good,” she told me when we spoke last year. “I said no.” He didn’t stop. Finally she stealed

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The next day, she asked herself whether she had done something to lead him on. *What if I walked myself into that room?* she wondered. But she knew she hadn't.

Laura never considered reporting Dan. "I just felt like he had the power," she said. He came from a wealthy family; his father taught at the university and his mother was a doctor. "His family would get him out of whatever he got into."

A little more than three months later, Margot dressed up for her first Halloween at college. "I was super excited," she told me last fall, smiling at the memory. Outfitted as an angel, in a white dress with delicate wings on the back, she traveled with her sorority sisters from party to party. They ended up at a familiar fraternity: Sigma Phi Epsilon. She remembers maybe having "one too many drinks." Parts of the night are fuzzy.

At some point she began dancing with a young man—Daniel Drill-Mellum. Later that night, he raped Margot on the laundry-room floor, next to the dryer. "I remember saying, 'NO, NO, NO!' Then I think I reached a point where I was just like, *I'm not winning this one. I'm not strong enough or coherent enough to fight him off,*" she said.

Afterward, as she straightened her filthy dress and gathered up her angel wings, now detached and broken, she glanced at Drill-Mellum. He was smiling at her. He tried to take her hand and said: Let's go back upstairs. *How is he acting like this is all so normal?* she wondered.

The next morning she went to the hospital, but declined a forensic exam; she worried that her parents would find out what had happened to her when they received their insurance statement. "There was a little voice in the back of my head," Margot remembered, "saying, *Well, maybe you don't remember it right. Maybe he wasn't as forceful as you thought.*"

The following weekend, Minnesota faced off against Iowa, a notorious football rivalry. Hundreds of students celebrated the occasion in a courtyard near the

alcohol from his apartment across the street. When they arrived, the apartment was empty.

Drill-Mellum began pulling off Honold's clothes. She panicked; she recalled hearing that if you cooperate with an assailant, he may let you go. She offered him oral sex if she could go back to the party. "And he said, 'Okay.' So I thought, *It's going to be terrible, but I can just do this thing and then he'll let me leave*," she said. "That was the only thing I could think of in the moment that would stop me from being raped."

It didn't. He raped her twice and, she says, committed acts that can only be classified as torture, including choking her until she lost consciousness. Eventually she was able to escape. She ran out of the apartment building, sobbing, and as her friends gathered around her, she called 911. An ambulance came and took her to Abbott Northwestern Hospital, and Sergeant Tom Stiller from the Minneapolis Police Department arrived soon afterward. (The assault occurred off campus, outside the jurisdiction of the university.) Stiller had already interviewed Drill-Mellum. "He says it was consensual," Honold recalled the detective informing her. "What do you have to say about that?"

[*Read: How to encourage more college sexual assault victims to speak up*]

Neither Honold nor Stiller knew about Laura or Margot. Like three out of four victims of sexual assault nationally, the two women had not reported their experiences.

Honold had sustained extensive injuries—one of which Linda Walther, the nurse who examined her at the hospital, had never seen before: a torn labial frenulum, which connects the inside of the upper lip to the gums. "I remember thinking I have to be super careful with all of my documentation, so that when this does go to court I will have this great record," Walther told me.

Walther was optimistic that, with thorough notes, this case would be relatively straightforward to prosecute. Honold had done everything right—calling the police immediately, coming to the hospital for an exam. "I can remember thinking that this was kind of a 'perfect case,'" said Walther, a sexual-assault nurse examiner who has recorded the injuries of more than 700 victims.

That night, Walther was still at the hospital writing up her notes when she received a call from Detective Stiller. She described Honold's injuries. "He said to me—and I'll never forget it, because it shocked me so much—'You know, kids are into kinky shit these days,'" she recalled. "Right away, I started getting worried."

As word of her allegations spread, Honold had the impression that many of her peers believed Drill-Mellum's account that the interaction had been consensual. Not Margot. She felt terrible for Honold, but also grateful. "She actually came forward. She went to the police," Margot said. "I remember thinking, *She can do all this for me. She can fight this battle for me.*"

The police could hold Drill-Mellum for 36 hours without charges. There seemed to be plenty of evidence against him: The forensic exam showed significant trauma. Friends confirmed that Honold had run from the apartment building, frantic, and described the assault just after it happened. Stiller even interviewed a woman who claimed that Drill-Mellum had raped her four years earlier, when they were both in high school. But the police also noted that Honold had accompanied him to his apartment willingly, and she had offered him oral sex. (Drill-Mellum and his attorney declined to comment for this story.)

The day after the assault, two of Drill-Mellum's fraternity brothers called Honold and secretly recorded the conversation. "He raped me a couple of times," she told them. One of the young men asked her, "Did you guys have consensual sex?"

On the recording, he stumbles slightly over the word *consensual*, and Honold pauses a beat, as if trying to decipher it. "Yeah," she responded. (Honold later told me that she thought he had said "actual sex" or "sexual sex.") "You did. Okay," he said, but before he ended the conversation, Honold explained that the rapes were violent. "I have a lot of injuries," she told him.

Soon after Detective Stiller learned of the friends' tape, Drill-Mellum walked out of jail. Stiller was not available for an interview, but Lieutenant Michael Sauro, his boss in the sex-crimes unit, says he discussed the tape with Stiller at the time and

evidence, it creates reasonable doubt, and you got to go on to another case,” Sauro told me.

“In retrospect, it was a pretty close case,” recalls Michael Freeman, the elected county attorney for Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis. “Frankly, people in this office were always troubled. It just seemed to be too violent and too inappropriate. But the tape really threw a monkey wrench into things.”

When Margot heard that Drill-Mellum had been released, she thought: “*It’s over. He won.*” She commiserated with Laura; the two had become close after they’d learned, through a mutual friend, that they had been assaulted by the same man. “I was like, ‘I’m glad I didn’t report,’” Laura told me. Honold had done everything she was supposed to do, to no effect.

“If you’re wondering why women don’t come forward,” Laura said, “that’s why.”

Perhaps it was easy to underestimate Abby Honold. She was 19 years old, still in college, a petite young woman with long blond hair and an open Minnesota face. It would have been so much simpler for her to just hide: Soon after her assault, she told me, Honold felt like a pariah on campus; she finished the semester from home. But she would not give up. She filed a Title IX complaint, and Drill-Mellum agreed to withdraw from school and remain off campus for 10 years. Honold’s lawyer persuaded Kevin Randolph, a detective with the university’s own police force, to take another look at the evidence. Randolph was skeptical, until he heard the recording. “I thought to myself: *This isn’t an exhibit for the defense. This is an exhibit for the prosecution.*”

Lieutenant Sauro gave Randolph the police files, and Randolph obtained a search warrant for the university’s administrative records. In those records, he found a Post-it note: The mother of another student, whose daughter claimed that Drill-Mellum had raped her, too, had called the school to report it. The student herself—Margot—had eventually told her mother, but had refused to tell the police. Now, through her mother, Randolph urged Margot to report the crime. She wouldn’t budge.

But on Halloween night in 2015, a year after Margot's assault, Laura spotted Drill-Mellum at a frat party just off campus. She immediately called Margot.

"This could just be a repeat of last year," Margot recalled thinking. "He could be doing the same thing to someone else." Margot and Laura called Kevin Randolph that night to tell him about the assaults on them.

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Now there was a critical mass, no longer a "he said, she said" case but a "he said, they said" one. Randolph worked closely with prosecutors to build a case. But Drill-Mellum was living in Australia, out of the reach of Minnesota law enforcement. When Randolph learned that he would be returning on Christmas Eve, for his sister's wedding, the detective got a warrant and arrested him when the plane landed.

Eight months later, Drill-Mellum pleaded guilty to raping Abby Honold and Margot. (Prosecutors declined to charge him in Laura's case; their friendship made it difficult to prove that the sex was not consensual.) Drill-Mellum received 74 months in prison. With good behavior, he will walk out on September 29, 2020.

I asked Lieutenant Sauro, who is now retired, how he rates his unit's performance on the case. "Excellent job," Sauro said. "Got a conviction. I mean, what more can you want?"

Abby Honold has paid for her public fight with Daniel Drill-Mellum, and with the law-enforcement apparatus that initially failed her. She's received death threats from Drill-Mellum's supporters, and from strangers. She now lives with her husband in an unmarked apartment on the edge of town; her address is kept confidential. But Honold's case made headlines on campus and in the media, and that notoriety has drawn out other women who have told her stories about a charming blond boy who suddenly turned violent—some who, until Honold's case was in the news, had no idea they were one of many; others who blamed themselves for letting him go too far, or who were afraid to tell the police or family or friends worried that no one would believe them. Honold says the tally, based on

unverified claims she has heard personally, is 20 other alleged victims and counting.

Honold spends her days as a full-time independent advocate, a career she wishes she'd never had reason to choose. In her travels, she's met hundreds of women with stories similar to hers. "I think a lot of people wanted to think that this was just this one-off situation," she told me. "The thing that makes it a one-off is that I was able to get it reopened and charged."

What's unique about Abby Honold's case is that her rapist is in prison.

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