

Without justice in Nome, women wrestle with trauma and healing after sexual assault

By

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Four-wheeling down Front St. in Nome, fall 2020. (Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

Content warning: this story contains sensitive subject matter.

There were 432 reports of sexual assault in Nome over a 10-year period ending in 2018. Of those, Nome Police made 45 arrests. So far, there have been even fewer convictions.

Some Alaska Native survivors say those statistics don't surprise them, and that law enforcement has prioritized other crimes but not sexual assault — especially when survivors are Native.

Nome police have acknowledged problems with a backlog of investigations and community trust. They say they have [changed how assaults are investigated](#) and how survivors are treated. The region's single district attorney said specifics of how consent is defined in Alaska law makes sexual assaults very difficult to prosecute, especially when alcohol is involved. But for women

who have been assaulted and see their attackers walking free in their small town, those facts bring little comfort.

Read Part 1 of this series: [In Nome, few sexual assault crimes result in prosecutions](#)

KNOM interviewed eight sexual assault survivors as part of [this series](#). A few themes emerged. Many are survivors of childhood abuse who were assaulted again as adults. Sometimes they were prosecuted for minor crimes while their attackers escaped prosecution entirely. The lack of resolution in their sexual assault cases deepened their sense that law enforcement was untrustworthy, leading survivors to grapple with their trauma for years — sometimes leading to depression, risk-taking and self-harm. Many found empowerment through sharing their stories, redefining what justice meant to them.

Brenda Qipqiña Evak is a 31-year-old Nome resident, justice advocate, and survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

At 15, Evak felt angry and confused without knowing why, feelings she later recognized as a trauma response to abuse she was exposed to as a child. As a teenager, she and friends began experimenting with alcohol. They turned to older community members in Nome to buy it. Sometimes, those older suppliers — always men — would drink with them. That's what happened one night in 2005 before Evak woke up at the Norton Sound Regional Hospital.

“The nurse said I was sexually assaulted,” Evak said. “They told me what the police told them. The police told them they found me without my pants on.”



Brenda Evak on Nome's Steadman Street in 2020 (Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

In interviews, survivors of sexual assault said they grew up hearing stories about local police — who were always white, always from out of town — harassing Alaska Natives.

They recounted stories about police slamming heads into the cop car doors, or stripping their clothes off in winter and sending people home on foot.

“I hear a bunch of stories about people who experience sexual abuse and they don’t get their justice. So people don’t really do anything,” Evak said.

When justice fails, then works against you

Evak’s assailant was never charged. She doesn’t know if police even looked for him. Nome police won’t release Evak’s case file, citing Alaska State Statute AS 40.25.120(a)(2), which exempts from public disclosure “records pertaining to juveniles unless disclosure is authorized by law.”

The only legal action that took place that night was against Evak. Nome Police issued her a citation for being a minor consuming alcohol, to which she pleaded guilty. It remains on her record.

She was assigned a counselor at Behavioral Health Services under Norton Sound Health Corporation. On her first visit, Evak remembers the male counselor asking if she was wearing her hospital bracelet from the incident, which happened just days before, to garner attention.

Keely Olson, director of Standing Together Against Rape, or STAR, in Anchorage, said that when sexual assault cases involving alcohol go unprosecuted, it leaves survivors alone to grapple with the trauma, feelings of guilt and the injustice that follows.

A lot of survivors blame themselves.

“A lot of folks will talk about how it was their fault because they were drinking,” Olson said. “It’s a very common response for us at STAR to say, you know, the natural consequence of drinking too much is to be hungover. It’s not rape.”

Who’s listening?

Another Nome woman, 25-year-old Andrea Ciuniq Irrigoo, said she also saw the justice system work against her. In April 2019, the days were getting long again, and Irrigoo had a new job and a new studio apartment downtown.

Irrigoo decided she would head down to Front Street and poke her head into the bars to find friends or even family who might be in town. At one bar, she was approached by a man she recognized as an acquaintance from around town.

He offered to buy her drinks, and she said she accepted. That was the last thing she remembers.

When she came to in what she recognized as her apartment, she was naked and the man from earlier was naked on top of her.

Irrigoo asked him to leave, but he refused.

“I was trying to hand him his clothes, and then he started to get rough. I was trying to push him away, then he punched me,” Irrigoo said.

Irrigoo fought back, but he got on top of her and strangled her until she lost consciousness.

“Then it goes black,” she said. Irrigoo remembers screaming out for her neighbor, who heard her pleas and called police. “Then, the officer broke down the door.”

EMTs took Irrigoo to the hospital for a forensic exam and rape kit swab. The police report from that night includes notes about a golf-ball sized bruise on Irrigoo’s cheekbone as well as red and raw patchy skin on her neck.

The man was charged with domestic violence — to which he pleaded not guilty — but the charges were dropped a year later by the Nome district attorney John Earthman. Earthman

declined to speak with media about the specifics of why he chose to dismiss the case, but said that ultimately the available evidence would not have led to a conviction.

“I definitely made a decision not to charge that case. And I definitely talked to her about the reasons for that. But I did have to give her news and you know, it’s not good news. It’s bad news,” Earthman said.

But despite that, Irrigoo doesn’t understand why such a violent attack against her wasn’t charged.



Andrea Irrigoo in Nome in 2020.

(Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

Irrigoo is a teacher, musician, and traditional Yup'ik grass weaver, but throughout various moments of life she's also struggled with trauma responses. Those are behaviors like self-medicating or self-harm that professionals say can occur after a traumatic event like rape.

Trauma specialist Eden Lunsford works at STAR with Olsen. She said substance use is a common coping mechanism in traumatic events.

"There are so many symptoms that come after a person has been through a sexual assault," Lunsford said. "Panic attacks, or anxiety, or depression, all these different things can come up. So the substance use (gives) a person a way for them to avoid feeling some of those things. It's a maladaptive way of kind of reclaiming their safety, their environment. But in all actuality, it's putting them in harm's way."

When she was four, Irrigoo said she was raped by a relative in the village where she grew up.

She attempted suicide once in middle school, and again last spring after the charges against the man who assaulted her were dropped.

"I went through a phase of, you know, what do I have to do to get the court to see that he is not a good person and he deserves to be in jail?" Irrigoo said. "Do I need to slaughter my wrists in front of the courthouse and say, 'You did this,' with my blood on there? ... I guess just to prosecute him, I'd have to be dead. Not actually be here talking about it. If we're not even being listened to in the court or anywhere else, then who's listening?"

Understanding Indigenous history as healing

[According to a survey published by the Urban Indian Health Institute in 2018](#), the risk of rape or sexual assault is 2.5 times higher for Native women than the rest of the United States.

By sharing their stories, survivors like Evak hope to bring awareness and understanding as to how the community got here in the first place.

"That is true, we do have high numbers," Evak said. "[Sexual assault] does happen a lot amongst our people. They're quick to point that out, but they're not acknowledging why these high numbers are the way they are. Why do we have such high numbers of sexual assault? Why has this gone on so long? The answer is because it all stems from generational trauma stemming from colonization. Nobody wants to say that westernizing our people was the reason."



Anvil City Square in Nome at sunset in 2020. (Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

Some residents say despite Alaska Native settlement in Nome for thousands of years, European history has overwritten Indigenous history, as seen in the town's square honoring the "Three Lucky Swedes" who found gold on Anvil Creek, attracting an extractive gold mining industry to Nome that still exists today.

A growing body of research connects Alaska's extractive industries to the dehumanization of Native people — particularly women — dating back to first contact. Some say the legacy of that dehumanization is carried forward in government institutions, like the justice system. In 1741, Russian hunters invaded the Aleutian Islands in search of natural resources and took Alaska Native women and children as hostages to bribe the Native men to hunt for them.

"So they were using women, and they were using our land for their own ends and their own means, and it didn't matter that we were human beings," said tribal attorney, Nome resident and sexual assault survivor Meghan Sigvanna Topkok. "We were not viewed as equal. If you were not considered civilized — Christian — you had less rights, fundamentally, than a person who was. So that's how European nations could come in and lay claim to our land and completely divest us of that."

Topkok said it's important for Natives to understand history to contextualize some of the inherited traumas that have resulted from colonization.

"For me, I didn't learn about a lot of this stuff until I was in college," Topkok said. "The moment that I learned about this in college, it completely reframed my understanding of the issues, and

my response. So all of a sudden, I started to understand why my family acted the way that they did, (and) why they made decisions the way that they did. For me, that brought a lot of healing.”

Not an exclusive problem

Despite sexual assault rates being higher among Native community members, it’s not an exclusively problem.

Former Nome resident, 55-year old Karen McLane, is a childhood sexual assault survivor turned sexual assault nurse examiner who grew up in Nome. Her family moved into a trailer across from the armory on the seawall side in 1970, and she lived in town until leaving for Tucson, Arizona in 2011. McLane moved away because of severe medical issues that inhibited her motor skills and her ability to defend herself. Ultimately, she didn’t want to be in Nome — a place she feels is dangerous to be a woman — without the ability to move around freely.

McLane, who is white, said she was sexually assaulted in the 1970s and 80s by a family member and various community members but didn’t report it to police until decades later when she fully understood her own abuse and became worried about the safety of another family member.

“We always called it ‘bothering us,’” McLane recounts in a phone interview from Arizona. “When we say, ‘Is that person bothering you?’ Up there, they were sexually harassing you. That’s what we mean by that.”

When McLane called in to report the incidents in 2017, the statute of limitations had run out, and no evidence besides testimony could be garnered. Still, she said she felt it was important for the community to know that her family, like others, was plagued with similar issues.

“Maybe if other women in Nome knew that an Anglo person like myself ... had those same kind of domestic violence issues as anybody else, and that sexual assault happens to ... a large percentage of us ... maybe other people would feel more comfortable saying something,” McLane said. “Using your voice in the right circumstance and with the right tact can effect change, even if it’s scary.”

Opening the door for other girls



Nome seen from Anvil Mountain in fall, 2020. (Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

Instead of vindication through the criminal justice system, many survivors in Nome are turning toward telling their story as a form of justice, empowerment and healing.

Deidre Levi, 24, is one of them. Levi is the high school girls basketball coach in her hometown of St. Michael. She describes herself as a very active and social member of her community — attending open gym every night — before her assaults. Now, when she enters a room, the first thing she does is look for three things she could fight someone off with.

Between 2018 and 2019, Levi was assaulted twice during trips to Nome.

One summer night in 2018, Deidre was hanging out with her older sister and a few of her sister's friends at one of the women's trailers in Nome. They were all drinking when the perpetrator came by for a haircut from her sister's friend. He stayed to drink with them.

The next time Deidre woke up, the man was on top of her, raping her. Afterwards she got up and left to her sister's hotel room at the Aurora Inn, where a friend was called who took her to the hospital.

The case was forwarded to the District Attorney's office, where it still is today — two and a half years later. Nome District Attorney John Earthman has not yet filed charges. Deidre has given up on formal resolution. After a certain point, she said she grew weary of the emotional toll of dealing with the case. She changed her number multiple times and made herself unavailable to the investigation. That made Earthman's job harder.

Instead of focusing on prosecution, Levi said she's directing her energy to mentoring the youth in her community through coaching.

"I was just opening a door for other girls that were too scared to open the door," Levi said. She wrote about one of her assaults on Facebook in a post that was shared hundreds of times, garnering the attention of survivors around the world. "A lot of girls messaged me, and they told me that they're not going to let anything happen again. And they said this cycle is stopping now, and we're not gonna be quiet about it anymore. The more you tell your story, the more it doesn't hurt you."



Four-wheeling down Front St. in Nome, fall 2020. (Jenna Kunze/KNOM)

This story is part of the [“Seeking Protection, Wanting Justice”](#) series by Alaska Public Media and KNOM, with funding in part provided by the Alaska Center for Excellence in Journalism.

This portion of the series was written by Jenna Kunze, co-reported by Alice Qannik Glenn and Emily Hofstaedter. The other parts to come outline community dynamics around sexual assault, deal with the difficulty in prosecuting a sexual assault crime, examine how Nome Police have handled cases in the past and hope to in the future, and explore what community members, survivors and law enforcement see as a path forward.

If you need to talk with someone after reading this or need help, here are some resources:

- *Bering Sea Women's Group: 907-443-5444; toll-free: 1-800-570-5444*

- *Behavioral Health Services at the Norton Sound Health Corporation: 907-443-3344, emergency number: 907-443-3200.*
- *STAR Alaska: 907-276-7273; toll-free 1-800-478-8999*
- *Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault: 907-586-3650*

If you are outside of the Bering Strait region, visit the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault website for a [list of resources](#).