

derailing harassment

tri-rail riders experience sexual harassment on their commutes to school

by Sasha Smith

the aftermath

Upon arriving at school after the incident, Norberto reported to her first class, Spanish 3 with foreign language teacher Lori Brown, where Norberto's account of her morning to her friends turned into a class discussion regarding sexual harassment.

"What struck me the most is how she thought it was normal," Mrs. Brown said. "She didn't think it was that big of a deal and that freaked me out. This can't be put under the carpet and ignored. This should be dealt with and exposed and not just ignored. I don't want any girl or guy to think that [sexual harassment] is acceptable."

Much of the harassment that occurs goes unreported and unaddressed. In fact, only 5 percent of surveyed students who had experienced or witnessed harassment at Tri-Rail went on to report it. Norberto is one of the many adolescents who felt that reporting the incident would just do more harm than good.

"[Students] should not feel threatened or worried that someone's going to grab them or touch them or do something like that," Mrs. Brown said. "Everyone deserves to be safe. It's not OK. It's not all right. And it has to be called out for what it is."

To monitor the trains and keep students out of harm, the school district assigns chaperones. These chaperones are often retired bus drivers or police officers, but they aren't held by any "high requirement" to become a chaperone, according to Assistant Principal Leo Barrett. They only have to be "an adult with some common sense."

Moreover, the school does not have an established school uniform, but instead allows for students to express themselves in reasonable attire; regardless, sexual harassment prevails whether the victim is in sweats, just as Norberto was, or something more form-fitting and "attractive."

"It has no nothing to do with what a person is wearing," Mrs. Brown said. "Nobody's asking for [it], and nobody has the right to do that, no matter what they're wearing. I don't care if they're wearing a pillowcase. I don't care if they're just wearing a huge garbage bag. That's not acceptable. It's just not right. That has crossed the line. That's sexual harassment."

talking about it

Sexual harassment comes in many different forms, however. Communications senior Emily Elias was stalked and verbally harassed her sophomore year at the Boynton Beach Tri-Rail station while waiting for her mother to pick her up on Valentine's Day.

"There's a nice tree space so that's where I will usually wait when [my mom takes] long," Elias said. "It was just me, another student from Dreyfoos, and this guy. Pretty soon it was just me and him standing there, [and] it had been 30 minutes."

Elias figured that since the boy was around her age, there would be no danger in engaging in conversation. He was going to a private special needs school but had been taking Tri-Rail and happened to be at the Boynton Beach station when he first met Elias.

Tri-Rail has always been a little bit sketchy," visual junior Arianna Norberto said. "Even at the Boynton station, there would be needles on the ground or gross condoms at the West Palm station. It was kind of scary, and there were a lot of scary people there. There was security, but there was no security for me."

During her sophomore year, Norberto was on her daily commute to school via Tri-Rail public transport when she was sexually assaulted. On that particular morning, after arriving in West Palm Beach, students were directed to exit the train from the left side of the tracks instead of the right side.

Hundreds of students emptied onto a stair platform to cross over to the street. Norberto, flanked by two of her friends, was in the midst of hundreds of public commuters pushing each other aside in a rush to work or school.

"I was walking and someone grabbed my butt. And then I turned around [to my friend], and I was like, 'Did you grab my butt?' And she was like, 'Why would I touch your butt?'" Norberto said. "[After] a few more steps, I felt the hand again and it was grabbing, and I was like, 'What the hell?'"

After feeling someone grab her from behind for the third time, Norberto realized that her friends were not playing a joke on her.

"Everyone was just walking ... like they didn't even [notice]. And then, there was this man who pushed in between me and my friends. At first, I thought he tripped or he was just pushing me to get out of the way," Norberto said. "But he just kept pushing me into the wall, and then I was cornered there. I remember just screaming and cursing him out."

Approximately 20 percent of students take Tri-Rail, and, according to a December 2019 survey of 843 students conducted by *The Muse*, a third of students claimed to have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment on Tri-Rail premises. According to the Florida Council Against Sexual Violence, adolescents ages 14-17 are the most likely to be sexually victimized, especially in a public environment that they are so regularly a part of.

"I had a hoodie on and I had sweatpants," Norberto said. "No matter what, you just feel like there's something weird, like everyone there sexualizes [you]."

tri-rail sexual harassment:

by the numbers

34% of students have **witnessed** sexual harassment at Tri-Rail

6% of students who witnessed sexual harassment on Tri-Rail **reported** it

20% of students have **experienced** sexual harassment at Tri-Rail

30% of students **do not feel safe** when they take Tri-Rail

graphics by Amanda Cohen and Isabella Ramirez

In the following days, Elias would embark on passing conversations with the boy while waiting for her mother to pick her up in Boynton.

"The next day, I saw him again on the train and my mom wasn't that late, but I talked to him because I saw him," Elias said. "Things started escalating pretty soon after that, right after school ended on either the third or fourth day. He was at the West Palm Beach station, not in Boynton anymore."

The young man had been waiting for Elias at the West Palm Beach station and made his way to her. She had told him where she went to school, but she never thought that he would pursue her at the nearest station.

"Holy crap. This is getting a little bit much." Now he's

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sitting with me waiting for the train," Elias said. "I have my friends around me and they're like, 'This is not OK. This is weird.'"

After the unwanted approaches had been going on for a few days, Elias finally spoke up about them. She was in speech and debate class when the viral Me Too social media movement of 2017 was brought up in a discussion. Elias later approached her teacher, communications dean Angela Anyzeski, about the stalking.

"She specifically came to me because it was something that was going on at that time, and she wasn't sure if she should be concerned," Mrs. Anyzeski said. "She didn't want to get the guy

in trouble, and she didn't want to overreact. As a woman, you're so worried about everybody else and inconveniencing other people and making them feel bad, and you take responsibility for how they feel ... and that's exactly what had happened."

Elias hesitated to relay the situation to Mrs. Anyzeski because she worried about making it into a "big deal" and "blowing it out of proportion," a common fear in victims of harassment who want to avoid appearing hysterical, overanalyzing intentions, or getting the offender in trouble.

After reporting her situation to school resource officer James O'Sullivan, the young man's school and parents were contacted, and he no longer rode the train at the same time or place as Elias anymore.

The issue of harassment on Tri-Rail reaches farther than the tracks. However, the administrative staff members have expressed that the school district has taken several measures to prevent incidents from happening. Yet, without frequent reports, the issue persists.

"We need to know anything that happens to our students that's out of the ordinary," Mr. Barrett said. "The school district pays ... Tri-Rail a very nice sum of money for each student to be a Tri-Rail rider."

Several years ago, a program for school police officers to go undercover and investigate issues was put in place. However, a stronger demand for school police to monitor school grounds arose after the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

"[Since] Stoneman Douglas ... [we] need a cop in every school," Officer O'Sullivan said. "So until we have every one of those filled, it might be hard to get an undercover operation because you're taking somebody off ... from [school duty]."

The school has also tried separating children from adults

on the Tri-Rail cars, designating two cars for students and two for public commuters. However, after discovering engine-related issues "a while back," each Tri-Rail train can only carry three cars of passengers, causing the separation efforts to be discarded and overcrowding to arise.

"It really became an issue when you had an overload of kids," Mr. Barrett said. "And what do you do? Tell kids not to ride the train to Dreyfoos? Or do you tell citizens who need to go to work, the courthouse, or any of these governmental places here in West Palm that they can't go to work on time? Separation only left some places overloaded and other places with not every seat filled."

Although the proposed solutions were ultimately unsuccessful, the issue can still be addressed if reports are made.

"It's communication. If you come to me with an official complaint, I'm going to make sure that [an] official investigation is conducted," Officer O'Sullivan said. "We should be able to address it. We can't fix what just happened, right? But, we could hopefully prevent it going forward."

what you can do

Sexual harassment is any sort of sexual behavior or act that is deemed unwelcome by the victim and was committed without consent. Do not hesitate to report any incident you may have experienced or witnessed.

"I would make sure I sit closest to a chaperone, and if you do see a creepy adult ... somebody should go and alert a chaperone. Chaperones can't help if they don't know." - Officer O'Sullivan

Besides reporting an incident to the Tri-Rail cops, chap-

erones, Officer O'Sullivan, or Mr. Barrett, the school offers mental health services for anyone who feels they need the in-school support. The school's professional behavioral health counselor, Rebecca Mroczkowski, can be found in her office in Room 1-116. National resources like helplines and online chats are also available.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted on Tri-Rail, report it immediately to an officer on campus. For more resources, contact:

National Sexual Assault Telephone Helpline:
1-800-656-4673

Online Chat for Help:
hotline.rainn.org