

Dianna Kim
Feature Story

In Her Safe Haven, She Was Damaged: Sexual Assault on College Campuses

On the morning of Saturday, September 22, 2019, Naomi Chung* woke up to her world being turned upside down in a matter of minutes.

She would become a part of the 11.2 percent of all college students who experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence or incapacitation, according to the [Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#).

Chung, a northern Virginia native, entered her freshman year at Virginia Tech feeling lonely and bitter despite a handful of high school friends following behind her trail. She had originally planned on moving north to enroll in a small college located in Massachusetts and dreamed of finding herself nestled within the urban lifestyle of Boston. Coming from a large family with humble roots, however, Chung had grown accustomed to giving up some of life's simplest pleasures. As a child, she would even go as far as refusing to even take the smallest nibble out of an extra cookie for dessert. Making sacrifices was an unspoken rule in the Chung household, one that each family member respected and obeyed.

"I was very aware of my situation, even from a young age," Chung said. "I would throw away the extracurricular flyers that I got from school before my mom could even get a chance to look at them. There was no way my family could afford extra art classes for me, but my mom being the wonderful mom she is would sign me up anyway. Growing up, I had to stay silent about so many of my hobbies for the sake of my family's money."

Thus, Chung packed her bags and settled into the dorm of a rural in-state school. Her life would soon change forever.

The early hours of that particular Saturday began with a ray of light falling upon Chung's face, awakening her from her slumber. The night before, she had gone to an upperclassman's small party and had asked to be driven back to New Residence Hall East, a close high school friend's dormitory. This was her safe haven. She often made herself feel at home in this small dorm room after a long day of classes. This was also a place where she had gotten to know her friend's roommate, Josh*, through inquisitive conversations, late night card games and study sessions. Unbeknownst to everyone, however, was her growing affinity for Josh.

Chung and Josh had originally met at a birthday party the summer before college. They had only exchanged a few words then but promised to reconnect once classes began in the fall.

On that fateful Saturday morning, Chung's relationship with Josh permanently changed when he climbed out of his bed and lay on the floor beneath her. He then sexually assaulted her while she pretended to be asleep.

"I could feel my entire body tremble while remaining frozen at the same time," Chung said. "I kept telling myself to stay silent and to stay calm. All I could think about at that moment was how glad I was that I was wearing jeans instead of tight leggings."

Chung fell back asleep afterward while her perpetrator crawled back into his bed as if nothing had happened. The scene before the assault and after had one thing in common: a strange sense of composure in which Chung laid asleep on both occasions. There was one difference, however: the presence of innocence tainted by a guilty crime.

After what seemed like hours Chung abruptly awoke from her sleep, quickly gathered her belongings -- a blue quarter-zip jacket that a friend had lent her from the night before and her black Jansport backpack -- said her goodbyes and slipped out of the room. She felt dirty. She ached to escape from the outdoors where hungover students were also making their way home.

She longed for a scalding shower. Writing down the details of the assault was all Chung wanted to do when she returned to her dorm. Staying in her room where the heavy air loomed above her head was nauseating, so she trekked to a faraway academic building across campus and proceeded to write her thoughts out into words that she could read and see for herself. “I think that’s when it hit me,” Chung whispered. “After I wrote everything out, I realized the severity of what had happened. Somebody who I thought was my friend, somebody I had feelings for, had betrayed my trust. I thought it would never happen to me, but that’s probably what everyone else who has been in my position once thought too.”

Chung stayed quiet for weeks while her mental health became warped with each day of silence. She was no stranger to secrets and prided herself on keeping each one as though she were a gardener tending to each mysterious word whispered into her ear. No secret, however, could have prepared her to keep this one. Chung continued going to her college classes, eating lunch with her friends and attending club events while bearing the burden of the biggest secret of her life on her. She carried on with laughing and smiling, as usual, ate regular meals and even followed her seven-hour sleep schedule every night as if it were religion.

“I don’t know how I managed to keep my senses after that morning,” Chung said. “Maybe I didn’t want people to think I was crazy if I were to be crying all the time. Deep inside, I was afraid that people wouldn’t support me after they found out I had been drinking the night before and that I had intentionally put myself in a vulnerable position by asking to be taken back to a place other than my room. How could I have possibly known what would happen the next morning? Taking advantage of an innocent friend, or any malicious act for that matter, is so uncharacteristic of my perpetrator but the truth is, anyone can be capable of doing horrible, horrible things. It doesn’t matter if they’re your best friend in the entire world or just an

acquaintance.” She continued with fingers pressed onto both temples, “I used to question why victims have such a hard time reporting. Before, I was in no position to question the difficulty of reporting and sharing your story. Now I can say that I understand why it’s so hard.”

According to the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#), 90 percent of sexual assault victims on campus do not report the assault. “In many cases, victims don’t report their attacks because they fear retaliation from their peers or from people of authority,” explained Stephanie Jeong, a volunteer for a clinic in northern Virginia. “This is usually the case in situations where alcohol is involved, which leads to victim-blaming and slaps on the wrists for perpetrators. It’s a terribly unjust normality that protects rapists and attackers while silently punishing victims and survivors.”

Chung’s facade of happiness and fortitude soon came crashing down. She had planned to eat dinner with her brother and his friends the weekend after the assault. However, Chung suffered a debilitating panic attack and never made it to dinner. “It broke my heart to see her own heart being torn apart like that,” said Mitchell Chung*, Chung’s older brother who also attends Virginia Tech. “I told her ‘let’s go for a walk’ so I could understand what was wrong. She kept telling me over and over again that she just wanted to go home.”

It has been over a year since the sexual assault that left Chung feeling tethered and hopeless. She is now a sophomore student who is diligently studying for final exams and preparing for internship interviews. Every so often, she finds herself in front of New Residence Hall East pondering on the thought would have happened had she spoken up that morning. “It’s gotten easier to talk about what happened to me freshman year,” Chung stated. “It’s a cliché, but it’s true: It gets better.” That is not to say the turmoil has ended completely. She proceeded with, “to think that I’d be one-hundred percent okay after just a year of something that strongly

impacted and affected my life was naive of me. It feels impossible to get out of bed in the morning sometimes. Healing is something you can't rush. It takes time, patience and support from those you feel comfortable sharing your story with."

[The Women's Center](#) of Virginia Tech is located adjacent to campus and is a block away from downtown Blacksburg, making it accessible for students in need. Not only does it dedicate itself to nurturing a university community of safety and support, but it also provides all Virginia Tech students, faculty and staff -- regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, immigration or citizenship status and spiritual or religious background -- with counseling and advocacy services. The Women's Center also played an instrumental role in Chung's recovery.

Two pages worth of explicit details are written within the black Moleskine journal that Chung holds tightly to her chest -- words that are still painful to read. The pages recounting the details of that morning remain folded up and stapled to this very day. "I don't have the courage right now to read what I wrote here," Chung said while patting the cover of her journal. "I have confidence that one day I will be, and when that day comes, I'm going to make sure that I'm ready."

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.



New Residence Hall East is one 26 residential halls on the Virginia Tech campus. It is also where Chung was sexually assaulted on the morning of September 22, 2018 (After paragraph 6).



Chung clutches her black Moleskine journal protectively. The full details of the assault that took place on the morning of September 22, 2018, are written inside (After paragraph 18, final paragraph).

Target Audience: College students, specifically females**, who feel inclined to educate themselves on what is happening on college campuses across the United States.

**Articles on sexual assault and related topics are targeted towards all readers regardless of gender. However, most readers tend to females.