Alumna continues raising awareness after graduation through organizations, videos

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Last spring, Nadia Rasha Khansa stood before Phi Kappa Psi fraternity members at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, ready to tell a story that for five years had kept her chained with guilt and pain.

It was silent. Khansa stood alone as the eyes of hundreds of young men locked in on her. She wiped her sweaty palms against the side of her cherry-red dress and took a deep breath. Fully clothed, she stood before the crowd of men and bared the naked truth.

"Hello, my name is Nadia Rasha Khansa, and I'm a sexual assault victim," Khansa said. Her words seemed to escape her lips like a gentle wind — not enough to startle, but just enough to make her audience feel something.

For 22-year-old Khansa, daughter of a Lebanese father and a Guatemalan mother, being a sexual assault victim is a reality that continues to haunt her every day. Despite having her trust stripped from her, more than once, she decided her gut-wrenching past could be used for something greater than her own tragedy.

"It's by no means something that is fun to do," Khansa said, sipping her vanilla latte. "I really hate it, honestly, but I see what it does for other people. I think it's important to just get out of my comfort zone a little bit if it means that other women will feel more comfortable talking about it."

As Khansa recalled the night she was first sexually assaulted, she gripped her silver and gold necklace, on which "God" is engraved in Arabic: "Allah."

"I was at his house. It was someone who was my friend, or I thought he was anyway. Statistically, I think 80 percent of sexual assault is by someone whom the victim trusted," Khansa said. "I had to walk home after and it was midnight, which usually is a scary thought for women, but I just remember as I was walking home in the dead of night, I was not afraid at all. Because I knew that no one could hurt me the way that I had just been hurt."

In trying to escape from her own body, the UL Lafayette alumna recalled putting herself in a "more complicated situation."

"I think it has a lot to do with the stigma about sexual assault, because for me anyway, the first time I was 17, so it had much more long-lasting effects," stated Khansa, smoothing out the right side of her short, raven-black hair. "It was 2011; people didn't talk about sexual assault as much in general. I really felt like I did something wrong to end up in that situation, and in hindsight, I know I didn't."

"That's a big part of why that stereotypical dirtiness, aside from it just being gross, it's just like the reason it sticks with you is because a lot of people don't know what to think of it," Khansa continued. "There's such a rhetoric about it being the victim's fault, but if they don't have access to the voices that are telling them that 'It's not their fault,' that's what they're going to believe."

After spending six years running from her past, the legs of Khansa's shame grew weary and she reached a fork in her never-ending road of anguish. Instead of continuing to avoid what happened to her, Khansa chose to heal and empower herself.

"My family came here as refugees (from Lebanon); we've always been citizens. I was born here, but we traveled back to Lebanon and then came back to the U.S. as refugees in 2006 and that was, in some ways, something that I'm still recovering from," Khansa reflected.

She said she was sexually assaulted in high school and again in college, the second time being the "climax" for her.

"That was when I decided I needed to do something for myself," Khansa said. "I had to go through major things to help myself recover from going through that a second time. In the middle of it, I just found myself reflecting on how all those events were related and it brought me to the idea of the project."

With the help of Leah LeBlanc, a moving image arts graduate from UL Lafayette, Khansa created "Letters From Women of the World," a project that opens the door for women to speak up against oppression and assault, raise awareness and remind women there is power in unity through art and writing.

"It is becoming something that, just in general, is uplifting women's creativity and encouraging and expressing our traumas. I think there is something beautiful about that," Khansa said.

The website for the project launched in August 2016 and includes letters written by women finally getting to tell their stories, videos classified as "poetry miniseries," videos of Khansa speaking at past events and information for future speaking events.

In "Phantom," Khansa's first episode of the poetry miniseries, she is wearing a white dress and standing in a bedroom. She describes the agony of being a victim of sexual assault, with pain piercing her voice:

"I'll never get a new body. I'm stuck reliving the torment. Every time I take my clothes off I see the bruises that have long since faded away, but are tattooed in my mind where he left them! They say I'm strong, even though there is nothing left of me to be strong."

Although Khansa may not view herself as strong, her boyfriend, Juwan Woods, 22, said he feels differently.

"Nadia and I had been friends for five years before we started dating and seeing her do so much; you know, it really shows me that I can always do stuff," Woods said. "I never tell myself that I don't have time to do anything anymore or that I can't do something, because I see her balance 5 million things at once. It's very inspiring. She doesn't believe in something and not practice it."

He also acknowledged Khansa gives a voice to all women, not just those in the mainstream. He said her heritage has given her a unique insight into different forms of discrimination that helps her reach out to more women.

"It's not just 'I'm a woman and this is what happens to women,' it's, 'I'm a woman and this is how I'm affected in my community because I'm a woman,'" Woods said.

As Khansa continues to build up the strength and trust that was ripped from her without consent, she said she hopes to inspire other women to do the same.

Since her talk to Pi Kappa Psi, Khansa moved from Lafayette to Denver to continue her education in graduate
Letters From Women of the World, however, has continued to collect letters and expand, as well as the videos featured on the program’s website. Khansa said she plans to continue the miniseries videos this December.

“I think being strong means you’re OK with yourself, whatever that means to individual people,” she said. “I just think that the strongest thing a person can do is just unashamedly be themselves and stand up for what they stand for.”

Editor’s note: Nadia Khansa served as a Vermilion columnist from fall 2014 to 2016. This story does not reflect her time with The Vermilion.