

THE KNIGHT COMMISSION ON INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS PRESENTS
A SUMMIT ON THE COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCE

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Dorothy Betts Marvin Theater
The Marvin Center
The George Washington University
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**8) Opening Remarks by Jemalle Cornelius, current football athlete,
University of Florida**

MR. CORNELIUS: I'm a current football player at the University of Florida and I had an opportunity to be in the Mentors and Violence Program, the MVP program last March. And I was just going to talk about that.

It was very effective. When I think about it the first thing that comes to mind is an example that one of the facilitators used and he told us to close our eyes and imagine the most important woman in our lives being beaten and not being able to do anything about it. And as I was sitting there I was like, wow, I mean I couldn't imagine the most important person in my life, my mother, being beaten and me just watching and not doing anything. And the reality is a lot of my teammates were in some way affected by that. They may have seen it, it could have been their mom, but in some way or another they were affected by that. And I think at the beginning of the meeting it caught everyone's attention, just talking about that and how serious violence is and the effects that it can have, not just on you as an athlete but on you as a person in your life.

And at the University of Florida the summer prior to having this meeting we had a lot of issues. We had a lot of situations occur where students were involved in violence at a couple of parties, a couple of clubs, a couple of women issues came up and Coach Urban Meyer was hired and similar to what was talked about earlier with the climate, and I think his biggest issue in coming in was he wanted to change the climate.

And one of his ways of doing that was having us go through this program and the program was very effective. First of all because it was clear cut. I don't think that student-athletes need to be hit with statistics about who's being raped or the amount of rapes that occur, it's just information. I think they need to be hit with more real life situations. And that's exactly what the program did. They told us what battery is, sexual assault, sexual harassment. They didn't just read the definition, they gave us scenarios. If you do this, you will be charged. And I think a lot of times the focus is more on information and definitions versus real life situations. And when freshmen come in and, I mean it's basically I think, you know, you are going to be hit with this situation and what values and what choices are you going to do when that situation occurs? And I think that that's one thing that the program was good at, was giving us a plan. I think prior to the program a lot of people were put in situations and I honestly feel they did not know how to react or they reacted in a way that they saw from the way they grew up or what they saw other people doing. And I think the program was good at doing that.

The second that comes to mind was the program allowed for us to be open. It was held on three different nights so the team was split and different groups went each night. But it was no coaches, just the athletes and the facilitators and I think that created a great atmosphere because it allowed us to be open. It's not, there's certain issues that are going on on campuses, at parties in the fraternities that I

don't think student-athletes are willing to talk about right in front of their coach. So it gave us a neutral, a neutralization where we can be open and we just talked. I mean they're not going to, we felt like we could trust them not to go to the media and say, well this particular player said he did this or this situation occurred, can you believe what's going on? It allowed us to be open and to talk about the issues that are going on in our student-athletes. I think the program was very good at doing that and I think, just looking at it, Coach Meyer, his philosophy, he talks a lot about core values and one of his core values is treating women with respect. And I think that when we look at violence it comes, I think that a university needs to pay attention to the coaches a lot more because when I was getting recruited I really didn't see it as much as I see it now, but your coach becomes a father away from home. So I think it all begins with making sure that the coaches have the core values and that they incorporate them in their programs because without that the issues that are faced will continue and our athletes will fail at making good choices and having the right values.

So I can't speak enough about how well Coach Meyer coming in and teaching us about values, I mean, I don't think a lot of programs are focusing on values and choices. They're more focused on scoring touchdowns and, you know, being a good athlete. But Coach Meyer and his staff go to extreme measures not to focus on us as athletes but more so as men.

And I think that the frequency with which programs like the MVP are done should be increased. That would be my only suggestion. I'm all for what it stands for and I know that—I mean when you talk about values and choices I don't think that student-athletes say, I want to go to a party and get in a fight and get arrested and be on the front of Sports Illustrated for being a complete idiot. I don't think they do that. It's like coach, I mean, sorry, Mr. McPherson said, I think it's a lot of bad information or no information at all. So I just think that student-athletes need to be pounded with things of that nature, with programs talking about values and choices.

And I can stand here today and attest that it does make a difference. If you look at the summer prior to this program and prior to Coach Meyer and his staff coming, the climate has completely changed. I know we had an issue with fraternities and football players. It's kind of, you know, the thing she was talking about, the burden, and that was one of the burdens on our campus and Coach Meyer at a point, he went to every fraternity house and took a couple of players and we kind of mingle with them. And I think that's what it's all about, taking a proactive approach to stop the violence between other athletes, student-athletes and, you know, regular students, and also women.

So I think that the more we approach this issue with the openness and a genuine concern for the athletes it will continue to dwindle.