

GRAY AREA OF CONSENT

Documentary 'Yeah Maybe, No' raises questions about what it truly means to consent to sexual activities

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Before sexual assault on college campuses came into the national spotlight, Kelly Kendziorski, who goes by Kelly Kend, started working on what she thought would be a documentary about rape.

Much of her film, "Yeah Maybe, No," takes place at Reed College, where students were ahead of the national curve in demanding better support for sexual assault survivors on college campuses, Kend said.

In 2011, six years after Kend graduated from Reed with a degree in anthropology, the college drew criticism for what survivors called its mishandling of sexual assault cases.

A group of students began to write the names of alleged rapists on a stall in a women's bathroom at the school. Students brought the names out of the bathroom in the form of a guerilla art installation featuring a toilet and a name-bearing wall for all to see. The group gained campuswide support, and Reed hired a new dean to tackle sexual assault prevention and help the campus better serve survivors.

The film focuses on a student named Blake. Blake attended Reed College before what he calls "the consent revolution." His experiences with a boyfriend when he was a student challenge mainstream presumptions about what constitutes sexual assault.

Kend also explores her own experience of being raped in an amusement park at age 12. She said she didn't fully comprehend what had happened until she was much older.

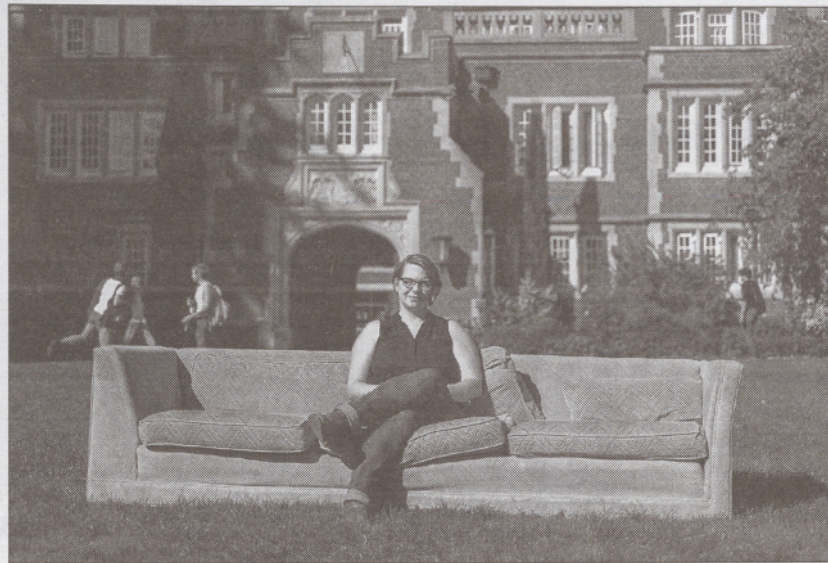
Now, at 32, she hopes that her first feature-length film will help audiences better understand consent and sexual assault so they can recognize when it's happening and so they can provide empathy and support to survivors.

As producer, director and editor, Kend watched her film about rape morph into a film about gray areas of sexual consent and unexpected victimization. She discovered there are many questions around what it means to give consent.

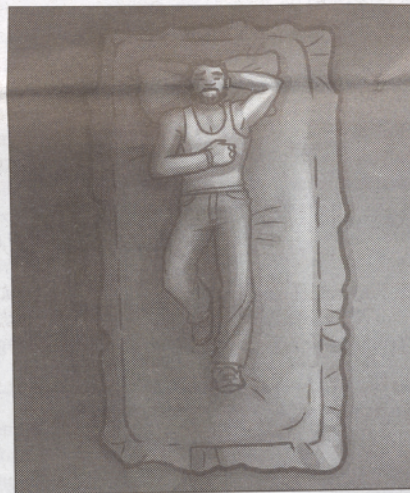
Through interviews with experts interwoven with personal stories and animated sequences illustrated by Lucy Bellwood, Kend offers a fresh perspective on a complicated issue. She hopes her film will complement the efforts of activists who are pushing for states to join California and New York in passing affirmative-consent laws.

These laws mandate that both parties must express a willing, conscious and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activities. In other words, silence, the absence of "no" or lack of resistance do not equate to consent.

"Yeah Maybe, No" is showing at 7 p.m. Dec. 2 at Hollywood Theater in Northeast Portland. Kend will be present to lead a question-and-answer session following the



Kelly Kend, a Reed College alumna, created a documentary about sexual assault that focuses on a student named Blake, depicted below in artwork from her film, "Yeah Maybe, No."



LUCY BELLWOOD

film. It's not rated but contains sexual content.

Street Roots met with Kend in late September outside of the Vollum lecture hall at Reed College, where her film would debut in mid-October.

Emily Green: How did the idea for this film come about?

Kelly Kend: It really grew out of my own experience being sexually assaulted, and that happened when I was really young. That really shook my idea of what normal is, but I didn't really ever use those words. I thought this was a normal thing that happened to everybody until I was quite a bit older. It was through becoming more aware of feminist writing and really through talking about my experience with other people that I realized, "Oh my God, that was rape!" And I had just lived with it for almost 15 years without getting any sort of help. I felt that was an important story to share, and I tried to find other people to share

their stories as well. Blake was really the only one that stuck with me through to the end. And so the film is about him, but it's also about my story through his.

E.G.: Why make a movie about consent? Doesn't everybody know that no means no?

K.K.: I think we do all know that, but it's just not that simple. A lot of people don't know how to say no, don't know they can say no. I know in my situation I was so young, I had no skills for saying no. I didn't understand what was happening. I know for Blake, one of his assaults happened when he was unconscious, so there's no ability to say no there. The reality of sexual assault is that it is more complex than just no means no.

E.G.: Why feature Blake? He's not your stereotypical sexual assault victim.

K.K.: That's exactly why. You get an interesting perspective by featuring somebody who you're not expecting to hear it from. You can't fall back into this stereotype of men are predators and women are prey if you have a male survivor.

E.G.: Your reaction when you found out that one of Blake's experiences was related to tickling – I think I probably had a similar reaction. How can tickling be a form of sexual assault?

K.K.: Because sexual assault is any sexual contact that is done without consent, particularly through the use of force, coercion or manipulation, tickling can be this really loaded experience where it's not playful. It's enforcing your will on somebody else, and I think as an outside observer, it is really hard to understand how that could be upsetting. But tickling is a part of sex, it's a part of flirting, it's a part of foreplay, and

when you do that to somebody when they don't want you to, that is an assault.

E.G.: Do you feel like, after going through this whole process of making this film, what sexual assault is and isn't is more clear to you now, or did it just add more layers of confusion around it, with all the nuances?

K.K.: What I really had to learn is, when a lot of people say sexual assault, what they really mean is rape, and that sexual assault is a broader term, and that sometimes it means tickling and sometimes it means something that is not penetration or is not particularly involving your sex organs. Understanding that can also be just as upsetting is something that I really had to learn, but I can understand that now.

E.G.: When you discovered that Blake's experience was seemingly less traumatic than your own, how did you approach that?

K.K.: I did think about not doing the film, but it was mostly an eye-opener to take it in a new direction because after the initial shock of it wore off, I realized that was the most interesting thing that had happened and the most interesting thing that had been said between us. I felt like that was an area to explore. It was a part of this conversation that I haven't really seen a lot of people talk about yet.

E.G.: Do you think that because he's male, it was more difficult for him to talk about his experiences and maybe it seemed a little more loaded to begin with?

K.K.: I think so. For a lot of men, you have masculinity, and it's not accepted to be weak. It's not accepted to be a victim. You're also expected to always want to have sex. Particularly gay sexuality, there's all these expectations around it. So I think for Blake to come forward and say it was an assault, he had to overcome a lot of stereotypes.

E.G.: Were you planning on telling your own story when you set out to make this film?

K.K.: I was on the fence about it. It's been really hard to tell my own story. Just in the practical sense of editing the film and watching myself tell it – at least a hundred times now – and that part is really challenging, to keep going over it again and again, being like, "Should I say it this way? Should I say it that way?" And watching the artwork get made. Having to approve artwork of my own sexual assault is not something I recommend anyone else have to do. It's weird.

E.G.: Is assault sometimes assault because of the way a person on the receiving end is feeling?

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