

State senator who was harassed gives ideas on how to improve policies

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Anna Reed/Statesman Journal
State Sen. Sara Gelser reported that a colleague sexually harassed her.

“too fat or too ugly or too whatever to have experienced this behavior.”

“And I was a person in privilege to do that and I can’t imagine being a 23-year-old intern in that process, going through that process. That is why people don’t come forward and talk about these things,” Gelser said.

The state senator from Corvallis urged the task force to consider a handful of changes:

- Create a pathway to put an elected member of the Legislature on temporary leave or remove them from the building while under investigation for sexual harassment.

- Expedite the sexual misconduct investigative and hearing process, ensuring it isn’t drawn out.

- Create a third, outside party, not affiliated with any political entity, where people can feel comfortable making reports of misconduct.

And perhaps the most difficult task remains: addressing the need for a cultural shift in

the statehouse where politics and power dynamics are in constant play between lobbyists, the public and elected officials.

Even in the midst of the investigation into Kruse, Gelser said one male lawmaker asked her why she was complaining and said he would love it if he was harassed by an attractive female.

Former Republican state lawmaker Vicki Berger, who sits on the task force, commended Gelser for coming forward.

“I know what it’s been like for you. It’s been hell. The culture won’t change, the background comments won’t change until this kind of thing forces it out,” Berger said.

Legislative leaders have asked the commission to finish its work in time to introduce legislation and new policies during the 2019 legislative session.

The commission will meet again next month and is seeking input from the public.

In the midst of an investigation into sexual misconduct in the Salem statehouse, state Sen. Sara Gelser learned two law students had reported being the target of harassment.

She panicked that the man accused of unwanted touching — Sen. Jeff Kruse, R-Roseburg — was still in the building and in contact with one of the young interns who had reported his harassment.

That can’t happen, Gelser told a task force charged with creating recommendations for the rules governing harassment in the Legislature.

Gelser told the task force this week she never anticipated how difficult it would be to go public with allegations against Kruse.

Gelser accused Kruse of touching her breasts and placing his hand on her thigh under a dais last year. Her accusations prompted a high-profile sexual misconduct investigation that revealed Kruse had a pattern of “engaging in unwelcome physical contact toward females in the workplace.”

Kruse resigned amid pressure.

“I did not anticipate what it would feel like to turn on the radio to hear my name associated with the word ‘breast,’” Gelser said.

Gelser, a Democrat, described physical threats left on her voicemail and people who talked to her about the incident while she was shopping for groceries. People openly commented she was,



Photos by Hannah Sievert/The Daily Astorian
Campers practice popping up off of their boards.

Surfers: ‘As a woman, you really have to prove yourself’

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“You have to go out there and catch a wave and surf it well, the first wave, or sometimes they’ll think you can’t surf,” said Brianna Ortega, a surfer in Seaside. “If you’re just sitting out there, they’ll assume you can’t surf. As a woman, not just for me but for everyone, you really have to prove yourself.”

Aiden Herth, a surfing coach at Hallahan’s camps, grew up surfing on Long Island, New York, where she said she rarely saw a woman with her in the water. She has noticed more women in the water on the West Coast, but still sees some difficulties.

“I’ve had tons of guys cut my line off,” she said.

Ortega is doing her part to change the way women surfers are portrayed in the media. The women stars of the World Surf League are recognized as elite athletes, and advertisers have long seen the potential of marketing surf apparel to women, but there are still stereotypes of women in bikinis posing with surfboards on the beach instead of out on the waves.

Ortega’s new magazine, Sea Together, aims to bring the global community of women surfers together and present their experiences through creative writing and interviews.

“I’m putting all of my frustrations into this, and doing a positive thing,” she said.

She raised over \$10,000 through Kickstarter for the magazine’s production and received donated writing, photography and interviews from world-class surfers like Carissa Moore of Hawaii. Emi Koch, a surfer from California who founded a nonprofit that uses surfing to teach ecological awareness, sent Ortega seashells from Indonesia as a sign of appreciation.

Sea Together’s first 100-page issue will be released at a launch party on Aug. 6 at Leeward Surf in Portland.

“We want to take the negative and turn it into something positive,” Ortega said. “Otherwise we’re not going to move forward or make any progress.”

The surf spots on the North Coast, where the water is cold and rugged, can be challenging. Hallahan remembers the days when there were no cold-water wetsuits made for women because manufacturers thought there were not enough women who wanted to paddle out.

When Hallahan first launched her surf camps, she hoped to create a women’s surf community that would stick.

“I can confidently say that it’s at a point now where it will continue to grow and there will always be women surfing on the Oregon Coast,” she said.



Students at Northwest Women’s Surf Camps prepare to enter the water at Short Sand Beach.

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