

Ep. 44: Leadership perspectives on Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention, Part 1

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Welcome to the Sword and Shield Podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge. Today, I'm joined with some very special guests. I'm here with... - Frances Martinez, Director of Psychological Health for the 960th Cyberspace Wing. - Thanks, Frances. We have a very special guest with us today over the phone. And so we're really excited to share with you all that we have Retired Lieutenant General Jay Silveria with us. Sir, welcome to the podcast. - Well, thank you Rick. It's really my honor to be here, thank you. - Yeah, I'm not a Air Force Academy grad, but your tenure at the Academy saw a couple of very important topics and you took a very bold leadership approach to those. And that's kind what we want to talk about today. - Well, thanks, Rick, I appreciate that. But I would say that one of the big takeaways from my time at the Academy regarding some of those topics, and I know you're experiencing that in your Wing, is that the societal issues that are outside of the walls of the Academy are also going on inside the walls of the Academy. No organization, whether it's the 960th, or the Academy, or the Air Force, no organization is immune to those societal issues just because someone has put on a uniform or joined the organization. So I think that was one of my biggest takeaways from my time there. - Yes, Sir, and I know when you joined the Academy, you came at a very tumultuous time. You had a couple issues going on there and I think we're going to focus on the Sexual Assault Prevention part of that time. But certainly if you wanna share any other lessons learned too, that you had from any of your experiences throughout your career, we'd be happy to hear that and really appreciate it. - Oh absolutely, absolutely. I look forward to the conversation. - All right, Frances, over to you, kick it off. - Yes, so thank you again for joining us General Silveria, we're so excited to have you. When we hear Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, which we all celebrate in April, the first person I thought about was you because I know that how you like to advocate for prevention measures and for victim care. And I couldn't imagine doing this podcast with anyone else. - Well thank you, Frances. I think that's awfully kind. There's a lot of people who are, who really helped me and supported me at the Academy at that time, but it's no doubt an important topic that everybody should be engaged in. So I appreciate your work. - Yeah, thank you. And so one of the things, I know the Academy had some bad press when it came to some negative events that happened there, but you know, you stood ground and really wanted to change the culture. And I think that's like the biggest part of leadership, right, is steering the culture in the positive direction. So can you talk a little bit about what you did and how that kind of changed to become more positive? - Yeah thanks, Frances. I think

one of the first things that I really took on, or I guess I sort of discovered, is that culture change on one of these tough issues, sexual assault and sexual harassment that we're talking about, culture change in that aspect, there's two big things that I learned that are probably worth talking about. One is that it has to happen among all levels of leadership and all levels of the organization. One of the struggles that I've seen over time is that sometimes leadership in the military, leadership in the Air Force, will aggregate that responsibility to someone else. Here's how it happens. A commander will say, whether it's at a squadron level or higher, will say, we need to talk about sexual harassment or sexual assault. And they'll bring in an expert, like you, or someone, you know, a learned expert or someone with a lot of experience in sexual harassment and sexual assault to teach, to talk to the squadron, or to the larger organization, and then they'll leave. And I think that that aggregates the responsibility from the commander. This is commander business. And if some, if the organization sees that all levels of the organization see this as their responsibility, that that's part of the culture, that each level of command is responsible, I think that's what's so important, that we can't just aggregate a societal problem or a societal issue and say that belongs to that office, they have to take care of that. Now it belongs to all of us. So I think that's the biggest, first point that I bring up about bringing culture change to an organization. - Well thanks sir, and that kind of leads into my discussion. I found it incredibly inspirational with your approach that you went on live TV, national, worldwide TV in a very uncomfortable situation and got some very pointed, direct questions after you'd just kind of been at the Academy a few months to deal with this. What kind of led to that, doing that live? And I noticed one of the, one of the reporters mentioned a couple of times that they really appreciated you being there in person to do it. And so tell us a little bit about that experience. - Well, I think they were, as the media and as the press would do, I think they were taking on an important topic as some people had bought them some information. And sort of however they arrived there, they wanted to include leadership. And I just didn't think there was any way that a leader should, call it shy away, or avoid the topic, and should be ready to stand up and take responsibility first off. I think that's the biggest message of a moment like that is that, I take responsibility as the leader and as the commander to chart the course for the organization. And so when asked to do that, I think it's important that we take those opportunities to step out and do that. But I also think that a big part of that, Rick, has to be, there has to be the continued follow up and interest, right? Too many times, something like that will be seen as, you know, call it a PR opportunity or a just get the message out opportunity. And so what had to follow after that had to be the work, had to be, we started having summits, and now the Sexual Assault Summits have really grown in the department of defense. But we really had the first one of the ones that have been going on in the past few years, we had one that spring, and I invited a number of speakers. And since then I've spoken at a number of other ones, but you have to decide to do the work, not just step out and speak out. Now it's time to sit down and do the work, decide what works, what parts have to be changed, where can we work on our education, where can we work on our prevention, where can we work on our response? You have to step out and take responsibility but you also have to do the work. - Yeah, I wanna touch a little bit about that because Colonel

Erredge and I have taken the approach of, we're in this together, we're here to make things better for our airmen and their families. In a prior podcast that I had with Colonel Swanson, he talked about leadership not being engaged when it came to suicide prevention, like you said, they kind of pass it off to the VPI or any other office, and it was just a once a year training to check the box. And we're really trying to change that. We're trying to talk about it all the time, right, and bring it to the forefront, and same thing with sexual assault prevention. It's something that we're wanting to talk about because the more we talk about it someone's more than likely gonna come forward because they're gonna feel comfortable that it's a safe space versus someone that they don't talk about it, and then, well, my leadership doesn't care, they're not gonna do anything about this. So that's where our focus really is changing that culture and know that it's okay to not be okay and get the necessary help that you need. - Well, Frances, I think you've said so much there. And I think it's so important to continue with those messages leaders that on sexual assault prevention, on sexual assault, and sexual harassment, on suicide prevention. It's so important that leaders continue the message because there's, call it a message within the message. The fact that a leader at all levels is taking the time when the organization's busy, right? The organization has a mission to do, has a lot of things to do, has a lot to accomplish, and when the leader decides, we're gonna spend time on this, then that sets, that's a very clear message that sets in the mind of the people that are in that organization. This is important, especially if it's, as you mentioned, that you continue to address it and you continue to come back. And then over time, I think that people begin to recognize the change. Well, they are taking this seriously, this is an important part of taking care of airmen, taking care of their families. So I think there's such an important message on the message that leaders are taking time to take on these topics. - So I find that interesting as well that people view it very differently through different lenses. And as leaders, it's really important for us to continue to listen to our airmen and what they need and continue to shape opportunities for that. So what kind of things did you find worked when you came back to the Academy, and you're like, okay, we're gonna get after the work, you talked about the summit, but what were some other things maybe that folks in our organization can do to try to kind of continue the conversation and give our airmen opportunities to talk about their experiences and get the help they need? - Yeah, I think in the area of sexual harassment and, specifically, and sexual assault, I think that it's important that everybody understands, from the leader's point of view, that you view this and that all levels of leadership view the different elements of this. Because it's about the education, about the prevention, it's about the response, it's about the accountability, it's about all points of that. And sometimes our service can be a little focused on one particular aspect. You know, we're gonna, a lot on, call it the victim advocates and the response portion, which is definitely important, but we need to have a program that involves all of those levels, the education, the prevention, the response, the accountability. And then I think you can build in an organization the confidence that they are working on this and that they are taking it seriously. So I think that's important. So to answer your question, I think what you have to do in order to take these subjects on is that it's, the answer is call it all of the above. It can't just be about focusing on the response. It can't just be about the

prevention. I found the case management group meetings is one of the things that I really put a lot of energy in. And so, in fact, we published an article later about case management group, about how that correlated to other opportunities in universities and other universities. While it was a military model to do the case management group, we publish an article about how that translated into universities. And the reason I found the case management group so important was that was a place where the prevention aspects, the education aspects, the commander, the mental health, the lawyers, the investigators, the chaplains, everybody came together to talk about an individual case. And we all learned about each case, not just the status of it and where it was going, but we learned about what we could learn from each case along the way, the steps parts of the organization had to take. So I found the case management group something that was really, truly valuable to us as an organization and to me as a senior leader. - Yeah, that's a good approach, right? That multi-disciplinary team of having chaplains, VPIs, the safers, and then leadership being a part of what lessons learned, right, what happened, what could we have done to prevent the assault or the harassment, and providing that wraparound care service. - And I think that that's, what we called it then was the idea of a network of care around people. That while we have an office that's dedicated to sexual assault, and sexual harassment, and dedicated prevention, but we also have our Family Life counselors and we have the chaplains, and we have EO, and we have IG, and that there's a network around airmen that is, that's that net around them. And you're right, their multidisciplinary, so that what's important is that people get education they understand through prevention and then they get the response and the help that they need. How they get that is not as important. And so we have to meet them where they are and find programs and find methods. Too often I think we look for the silver bullet, right, this is the program or the element, and that just simply is not the case. Some people are more comfortable talking to the chaplain in that multidisciplinary role that you mentioned. Some people are more interested in going into the safer office. Some people want to talk to a peer, so we started training peers. So I think that you have to present it as a mosaic for people to help them. - Yeah, and that's the direction that we're taking here at the Wing. So we're developing resilience teams at each of our units, that way they have that peer-to-peer support and then that immediate response. And so those are one of the things that we're taking on. And we educate as much as we can and share resources. We have large events happening around the Wing to promote chaplain services, Military OneSource and Flac Safer, that way people know they have, okay, all these different outlets that they can go to if they feel comfortable with one more than the other - And, Frances, I think that's so important. And one of the things that we developed in the time that I was there was the peer program that we had developed among, and it was among cadets because it was the age group we were dealing with, the 18 to 24, but you have that same age group but the same principles apply, that people in many cases are more comfortable talking to someone that's more of a peer in their organization or someone that's closer to them. And so we started giving more training to those individuals so that they were ready and they were better prepared for those conversations. And then the other part that we started doing which was along the lines, more of meeting them where they're at is, is closer to, call it

embedding, putting chaplains that are in the same organizations consistently and mental health providers that are around in the same organizations consistently. People get used to seeing them. They get used to talking to them about nothing, about other things, then they're more prone and more comfortable going to them and asking for help because they know them and they've built a relationship. - Yeah, building rapport is one of the biggest things when it comes to divulging information. And so my position here, I have that luxury, right, 'cause I'm with all 1,300 members and their families. And so I've been creating those relationships with these people and then using those resilience teams and building that relationship we have right now. I was talking to Colonel Erredge this morning that we have a team of 32 people across the Wing nationwide that are on this team. And one of the focuses, I stressed, no leadership, right? Because a lot of people, they don't want to go and talk to leadership about, I was assaulted or this is happening. And so we wanted to make it a comfortable space. And if they felt comfortable talking to senior airman Smith about this is happening and then that senior airman can help facilitate them talking to me or any other outlet to get that person the appropriate help. - Yeah, Frances, I think that's, I think that's so important. One of the things that we discovered through a lot of the surveys, through the annual surveys was that a sexual assault and sexual harassment took place more often in environments that had, that were subject to, where discrimination took place even at the, call it the lowest levels. And environments that allowed comments or even the slightest innuendos, or the environments that allowed that we're more prone to harassment or assault. So it's important to be at the, call it the lowest level so that everyone can begin to understand that they have someone to talk to about even the smallest comment, or the smallest, or a joke, someone sees as a joke, or innuendo, that's where it has to be stopped. And when you can have a peer that you can talk to, to help someone understand that and they see that leadership cares about that lowest level that's when you can really start to make a difference. - Yes, sir, I noticed the other main topic that you ended up dealing with there at the Academy when you first took over was the racism issue. - Absolutely. - And your response of how you handled that and attacked that problem, and frankly attacked it head on and with the entire USAFA team and all the cadets there was really well done. And I think that thing's been viral and played everywhere, but... - (laughs) right, right. - That leads into your discussion about, we can't tolerate any of these behaviors or crimes and setting that tone for no tolerance. And so what was your approach to, again, getting after the work there from a tolerance perspective and getting people to understand what the, not only what your intent was but where they're coming from their different experiences in life, of what they've learned, what tolerance means? - Yeah, thanks, Rick. I think there's a couple important topics there that ultimately, and you as a commander in the organization, we need the best performance out of our people. This is a tough mission in a tough environment. And the only way to get the best performance out of our people is that they are comfortable and that they can thrive and they can grow and they don't feel subject to any discrimination, and that's in any manner of human condition. And so what I set out, when that incident happened, is to make sure that our values were defined. It has to be grounded in our values, not about a blame, right? A lot of people focused on blame at times. It's not about blame. We

have to be a set of foundational values, these are our values. And it has to be that any manner of human condition, whether it's religious, or gender, or sexuality, or background, or socioeconomic, or where they grew up, or their parents, or any manner of human condition to us is it should not matter. What matters is that they can do the job. What matters is that they can perform when called on and that they can meet their responsibilities. And so I think when you put it in those, just in those clear, clearest terms, I think that really becomes empowering to a lot of people that they are part of something where their leaders see it that way, that it doesn't matter, what matters is that you can do your job. - Absolutely, and I know we've had previous discussions. People coming into the military, everyone thinks, okay, they're in the military, they are perfect. And we're held to a different light, right, than civilians or non-military associated individuals. And I don't think people realize, number one, military personnel are human and they are affected, and they bring with them a lot of baggage as it relates to adverse childhood experiences, right? How I grew up is going to affect how I perform and what bad habits I bring with me to the military. And I don't think people really understand or think about that. - I think you're absolutely right, Frances. I'm referencing my Academy environment but my times as a commander before that, it's a very similar, a very similar problem. Every year at the Academy 1,200 people showed up. And they came with all of the baggage that you mentioned. You know, we screen them and there's lots of interviews, and they have congressional nominations, and qualifications but now it's, in many cases, the first time they're away from home and they bring with them what their family's values were. And they bring with them what people, what people said. I mean, I've consistently made the comment that, think about it this way. Someone drove up, they got dropped off by their family, and they began their journey at the Air Force Academy. The conversation that happened in the car on their way, what if there was a comment that was disparaging of women, or a race, or a religion, or something that was not with our values, it was in the car. And they got out of the car, and then we took them on to join the Air Force and take on our values. We are fooling ourselves if we think that the moment they walk in and we give them our values that they instantly flip. We have to educate 'em. We have to continue to espouse our values and then commanders have to be consistent with that over time. And then all of us need to recognize that some times the idea of, didn't we just talk about this? Oh so of course we did. But somebody's now going to walk in the door the next day and we have to continue with those new members that are joining us to take on our values. - Yes, sir, I think persistence is a key word that I spend a lot of time thinking about. And I feel like, man, I'm talking about this way too many times, people are gonna get tired of hearing about it, and we talk about what our priorities are and what we believe in and what my intent and vision is. But then what I'm hearing from you is that we need to be consistent and persistent in that message 'cause everybody is getting their inputs from their own environments, and that could be contrary to what we're trying to do. And at times it can be exhausting, I'll be honest. And then other times it's invigorating and I wouldn't want to hear other people kind of talk back about the things that I say and I hear other people paired it. And then they're saying it the right tone and context, I feel good about, hey, it's getting through and we're trying to build a culture. And obviously every organization has

their own culture that when you get new people coming from all those different experiences that they're going to bring those pieces that they want as well. So we're trying to grow our culture here as a new Wing as well. And I know as leaders, we always try to, people get tired of hearing, we need to change the culture, we need to change the culture, but it's really important for that leader to set that tone and culture, what they want their organization to be. - Oh, Rick, I think you're absolutely spot on. And in so many ways just acknowledging that you need to do that and that there's work to be done. It really emboldens everyone else to realize, yeah, there is work to be done, that nobody's ignoring something or nobody is downplaying some element, is saying, yes, our leadership sees that there's work to be done. I want to be part of that and part of that work. And that persistence, believe me, I know exactly what you're talking about. That sometimes you feel like didn't we just talk about this? Didn't we just say this? Well, you did, and you're going to have to say it again tomorrow, and next week, and next month, and stay consistent. - All right, sir. Hey, we really appreciate your time. We're going to wrap up here. And again, it's really, really important for us to continue to talk about this and we appreciate you being part of the conversation with the Gladiators, the 960th. - Absolutely. - Well, Rick, thank you. I can't tell you how proud I am of the 960th, how proud I am of you and Frances for taking on this topic and continuing to show leadership in that way. So thank you for what you're doing. - Thank you, sir. And out there to our Gladiators, if you've been sexually assaulted and need assistance please contact the DOD Safe Helpline at (877) 995-5247. It's anonymous, confidential, and they are open 24/7. (Upbeat music)