

Good morning. I am just back from two weeks of travel in Asia -- primarily Korea and China. It was a very interesting trip was, but I have to say that I missed all of you and am glad to be back!

As far away as I was, and even with important regional issues in the headlines, the controversy of the Senate confirmation hearings of Judge Brett Kavanaugh came through loud and clear. And since my return, like many of you, I suspect, I have closely watched this issue that has deeply divided this country.

And there is an aspect of this topic that I would like to briefly address with all of you this morning – and I would appreciate your careful attention.

Judge Kavanaugh’s testimony, the investigation into his past, and the entire Senate process have raised a whole series of important questions.

But I’ll be clear that I am not here to express an opinion on the strength of his considerable judicial credentials; on the viability of his candidacy; on whether he has the temperament to serve as a Supreme Court Justice; or on the legitimacy of the FBI investigation.

Those issues are in the hands of the United States Senate.

I am here to talk to you about Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology at Palo Alto University, a research psychologist at the Stanford University School of Medicine, and the woman who alleges that Judge Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in 1982, some 36 years ago.

I am struck by a number of things. We have here an individual who has come forward with her recollection of an incident.

Initially, as she spoke in front of a national audience, few, if any, regardless of their political views, appeared to doubt her personal credibility and sincerity; and across the broad spectrum of opinion on this matter, most agreed that she displayed tremendous strength, courage, and composure in telling her story to the entire country. And most reasonable people seem to agree that something traumatic happened that summer in 1982 to Dr. Blasey Ford.

Some may feel that memory of an event 36 years ago is imperfect; some may worry that certain details are unverified; some may worry about the lack of hard evidence. All fair questions. I am not here to speculate or render an opinion on that.

I do, however, want all of you to think about what it takes to come forward and do what she did, and how she has been treated since. She has more recently been attacked, mocked, threatened, and repeatedly questioned.

And to bring this closer to home, as I have watched this whole political drama unfold, I have to believe that many of you must be wondering – what would happen in this community if I had something to report? Would I be believed?

And this goes right to the heart of my message this morning.

I want to make it clear to all of you that in this community, if a person comes forward with an account of any type of abuse, but particularly in the case of sexual assault, our default is to begin by believing you and to take all credible testimony seriously while we do a careful investigation to establish as clear a set of facts as we can.

In this regard, I remind you that we have many avenues for safely telling your story -- we have our anonymous reporting portal, Safe Schools, we have counselors in the health center, and then of course advisors, housemaster, and for that matter, any adult you feel you trust.

Above all, our goal is **to believe you, to support you, and to work to keep you safe.**

Now there may be some of you who are focusing on the possibility of a false accusation, that it is possible in these circumstances to be accused of something you didn't do and have a difficult time defending yourself.

Let me put your minds at rest, and forgive me for speaking in gender binary terms here, but I am speaking primarily to males, to the men in the room, both the young and the not so young.

Speaking as a man myself, I think our worries in this regard are highly misplaced. Be respectful, be thoughtful, do not ever pursue any degree of intimacy without clear consent from your partner, **be a gentleman**, always, and you will be fine.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center produced a report not long ago with support from the US Justice Dept. Their broad review of the research shows that false reports, based on FBI guidelines that define a 'false report', occur in 2-10% of cases. In other words, even the more conservative studies suggest that 90% of the time, allegations have some basis, and some studies suggest that 97 or 98% of the time, when individuals are willing to come forward to tell their story, they are telling the truth. False accusations, while possible, are extremely rare. (https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Overview_False-Reporting.pdf)

So for me, the primary relevance of Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony to our community here at Lawrenceville is that it serves as an important reminder of the difficulty faced by survivors of sexual assault when trying to tell their story, and the ease with which even a credible account can be thrown into doubt and swept aside.

I will end with a quick story.

A few years ago, a classmate of mine from Williams College had a daughter at a small New England College – and while she was a student, she was raped by a fellow student; while some elements were unclear, the investigation ultimately concluded that her story was believable and her assailant was removed from campus for a year.

Although he was gone, his friends retaliated and made her life unbearable – They taunted her, made comments, and when she showed up at a party at one point, his friends threw empty beer cans at her. Can you imagine that? When her assailant was allowed to return to school, she had had enough and she finally withdrew.

My final point here is that this kind of boorish, reprehensible behavior, this ‘bro culture’ still exists out there, both in the form of the assault and in the way in which his friends, in a cruel and cowardly fashion, re-victimized the young woman afterwards.

So that is out there. I cannot change what you may encounter out in the world, but my goal is to send a clear message about how we regard this behavior here at Lawrenceville, what we tolerate, what we do not tolerate, and ultimately, the kind of community we want to be.

Thank you very much.