A rape allegation, followed by a major resignation, forces Reno artists into #MeToo moment

Jennifer Kane  Reno Gazette Journal
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Share your thoughts about #MeToo within Reno’s arts community. Contact arts and culture reporter Jenny Kane at jkane@rgj.com.

It all changed with a social media post in March.

That’s when artist Jaimie Crush learned the Reno police had stopped investigating a rape allegation she made in 2015. Until then, Crush had kept the specifics of her allegations off of social media because she thought it might hurt her case, she said.

But once she made the details of her allegation public on Facebook last month, they would roil Reno’s growing art scene, forcing local arts organizations to examine their policies on sexual misconduct.

"Once I realized my case was closed, I didn’t care anymore," she told the Reno Gazette Journal. "If the police aren’t going to do anything, I could at least inform the community about it."

On March 12, Crush posted a statement on Facebook alleging she was raped by local arts director Aric Shapiro, an allegation Shapiro continues to vehemently deny.

Reno police had investigated the 2015 incident but closed the case because they could not substantiate Crush’s allegation, according to Lt. Zachary Thew.

After Crush made the allegations public on Facebook in March, the board of the Generator, a local arts and maker space, asked Shapiro to resign as the nonprofit’s development director, according to the Generator’s own public announcement on Facebook.

Shapiro was largely the public face of the Generator, which produces some of the most recognizable Burning Man art installations, including the Galaxia Temple, Embrace and Space Whale (which now is on display in Reno’s downtown plaza). Shapiro's job was to grant media interviews and promote membership drives, events and new programs.
Shapiro said in an interview with the Reno Gazette Journal that his band, Weapons of Mass Creation, also asked for his resignation just after the band played at South by Southwest music festival in March in Austin, Texas.

"Considering the social media mob, there were a lot of people jumping to conclusions," Shapiro said in an interview. "Everyone reacted pretty quickly."

The comments on Facebook were scathing. Crush was shamed, she said. Shapiro was blamed, he said.

Many people in the art scene simply froze, unsure of where to steer the conversation.

"I think people don’t want to point fingers because they know these people are (their) friends. The community is so close-knit, it’s like family," said Kelsey Sweet, a local artist who last week organized a forum, "Sex in the Art Scene," to discuss sexual consent in response to the fallout at the Generator.

"But I think there are, under the surface, more people that want to speak out," Sweet said.

While Shapiro's future in the Reno arts scene is unclear, and Crush moved out of state before posting her story on Facebook, arts leaders in Reno find themselves in
the throes of the #MeToo movement, questioning how to both prevent and address future allegations of similar nature.

"I would think that the arts community would be further along having this conversation," Sweet said. "There are a lot of artists who are also activists, but these allegations are coming from within."

More: #MeToo at Burning Man: The cracks in consent culture on playa

'Case closed'

Crush first made the allegations to police against Shapiro on Feb. 24, 2015.

She was an artist breaking onto the scene with her watercolor illustrations and printmaking, she said. She'd volunteered and shown work at the Holland Project and Midtown Art Walk.

Shapiro was executive director of Reno Art Works, another arts and maker space. He was matching artists with galleries and that year founded Reno Sculpture Fest.

The day of the incident, Crush talked to police. She told police that she and Shapiro, with whom she’d had previous sexual relations, were hanging out at Crush’s home the night before.

Crush said she'd told Shapiro that night that she did not want to have sex and they went to sleep in the early morning hours. Crush awoke and believed that Shapiro had sex with her while she was sleeping, she told police.
Aric Shapiro, former development director of the Generator, following a recent rape allegation on social media.
Andy Barron/RGJ

Crush didn't name Shapiro to police initially. After she named Shapiro several months later, he cooperated and spoke with police. He recalled having sex but told police Crush had physically indicated interest at the time, Shapiro told police.

"Everything was fine" until he finished, at which point she became angry, he told police. The police closed the case in July 2015 after speaking with Shapiro.

The last words in the report read, "Case closed unable to prove."

Crush became depressed and angry after the alleged incident and withdrew socially, she said.

"Aric's everywhere. I would basically stop going to arts events," she said of the months following the alleged incident.

Most people in the arts scene did not care, or they said that Shapiro was too ingrained in the community to be taken down, Crush said.

"Or they'd say, 'That's terrible,' and still support him," she said.
Crush didn't return officers' calls after they spoke with Shapiro. She didn't know they’d closed her case, she said.

Shapiro left Reno Art Works to work at the Generator in 2017.

When Crush saw a social media post about Shapiro earlier this year, she said she decided to follow up on the case. That’s when she learned the case was closed. That’s when she made her story public on Facebook.

"If your art or music scene needs to survive on a bed of lies, on abuse, then it needs to be destroyed, it needs to be rebuilt," she told the Reno Gazette Journal.

Since making her story public, Crush has had sexual assault survivors — whose stories are unrelated to Shapiro — reach out to her. She's also had people doubt her story, she said.

"The veil got a little lifted. That was disappointing to realize (some people) cared more about politics and popularity than sexual assault, but I also got to see community action taken," Crush said, noting that Shapiro's removal from the Generator felt like a victory.

Shapiro said the allegations were devastating, both when Crush first made them in 2015 and more recently.

For Shapiro, he is looking at his "life in tatters," his attorney, Paul Quade, said.

Shapiro described the past few weeks as "mortifying, deeply disturbing, sad and confusing," because he felt like he had consent from Crush at the time, he told the Reno Gazette Journal. He felt like he had a clear understanding of consent to begin with.

Shapiro was disappointed too by what felt like colleagues' "knee-jerk reaction" to public pressure, Quade said.

"His denials fall on deaf ears for a lot of people, particularly in this day and age," said Quade.

While there's been some pushback on the #MeToo movement and questions of whether it’s gone too far, Quade said he's concerned that someone like Shapiro may not find an entry back into the community, a "road of redemption."

Shapiro is hesitant to apply for jobs in the arts or appear at community events, including the recent forum about consent, which Sweet considered having him attend, according to Quade.

In recent weeks, Quade has tried to reach out to Crush on LinkedIn to persuade her to remove what he says could be potentially defamatory references to Shapiro from her social media posts and comments. Getting no response, Quade said he has now hired a private investigator to reach her.
Crush said she's not heard from anyone.

Quade said he and his client are not currently considering any kind of legal action, though they may reach out to Facebook to remove some of Crush's comments.

"This kind of terminology is very problematic, it carries a lot of baggage," Quade said.

'It goes far beyond our little arts scene'

In the month that has passed since the allegations became public, Reno's arts scene has been reeling.

On social media and behind closed doors, artists have been grappling with the fallout from the allegation and resignation.

"I don’t know enough. By nature, I like to gather my data before I form an opinion, and I’ve lived long enough to know that my opinion six hours later might not be my initial opinion," said Nettie Crowder Oliverio, who co-chairs the Reno Arts Consortium with Shapiro. "There are too many unknowns. It’s not my place to judge."

She said she has no intention of asking Shapiro to step down from his post at the consortium for local arts leaders, but she hopes the allegations spur healthy discussion about creating safe spaces in the arts community.

Crowder Oliverio said she recalled holding a forum on the topic of safe spaces in the arts scene several years ago. A safe space is a place in which people can feel free from the threat of discrimination, harassment and harm.

Crowder Oliverio was hopeful that, after the initial forum, organizations had taken preventive and corrective actions at the time.

"It’s unfortunate that we have to have crisis mode to generate discussions. We don’t pay attention enough until someone grabs you by the throat and says, 'Pay attention,'" Crowder Oliverio said.

Last week, a crowd of about 50 artists gathered in the basement of the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts to review how those in the arts community understand consent. A panel of experts — several sexual empowerment coaches, a former juvenile offenders counselor and a representative of a local women’s shelter — talked about the need for better sex education for both youth and adults.

They also talked about the "gray area" that exists between making a sincere mistake and deliberately violating someone’s right to consent, and also about what local organizations could do to more effectively prevent such situations.
"Policies that say 'never' are the ones that don't work," said Monica Jayne, a sexual empowerment and relationship coach from Reno.

Policies that reiterate, "If this happens, then..." are more effective at establishing what is misconduct, and addressing misconduct, she said.

Some leaders within the local arts community have said they are realizing they have no written policies, no plans of action, no directives to follow when issues of misconduct and criminal allegations arise.

The Generator, for instance, is just now writing a detailed safe space policy and creating a committee to handle any complaints that might deal with harassment or personal violations, according to the Generator’s board president, Jerry Snyder.

"We’re going to start from a position of what survivors say. Every situation is going to be different, every one. I think we have a lot of work to do," Snyder said.
Navigating accusations against both employees and members of the space — including accusations that take place off-site — is going to be one of the many tricky topics.

"You want to say that (an accusation) shouldn’t be enough. You want burden of proof, but there’s a certain amount of evidence out there that says the rate of false allegations are astonishingly low," Snyder said.
The Generator, an arts and maker space in Sparks, asked its development director, Aric Shapiro, to resign in March 2019.

RGJ file photo

Snyder said the Generator is looking to some of the arts organizations in town, specifically the Holland Project, an all-ages arts space, that already have policies. The Holland Project in the past few years created its policy and a committee to address internal complaints and issues.

Mary Bennett, artistic director of Reno's Brüka Theatre, said she is uncertain of where to start with her own organization’s policy.

"We don’t know what to do. I think that it’s important that we have these conversations. We’re human. It’s hard with social media, where we can have people pointing fingers and people can’t defend themselves. We’re in new territory," said Bennett.

Currently, the theater's policy is vague, Bennett said. The policy is constantly changing in an effort to keep up with the times, said Bennett, who attended last week's forum in hopes of finding some answers.

"We’ve been a bit naïve in certain things. We want to elevate, educate ourselves so that we create a safer space," she said.

Sweet, who organized the consent forum, said that the arts community needs these policies as much as any other community, if not more.

"We’re more emotional people. Artists have eccentric lifestyle choices, they’re using substances. It makes these people more vulnerable to sexual assault because there’s a lot of experimentation going on," she said.

Panelists during the forum encouraged arts leaders to discuss consent, hold training sessions and enforce policies consistently for everyone in the organization once those policies are in place.

"At what point do we say, 'Just because you have these privileges and just because you do great things, you don’t get a free pass,'" Sweet said.

As for Shapiro, he's hopeful that he can clear his name and eventually regain his standing in the community.

"I would hate for a misunderstood situation to limit my ability to make the world a better place," Shapiro said.

Crush does want to forgive Shapiro, and the arts community, for not listening to her, she said.

"Honestly, I don’t believe in burning someone forever, I believe in the power of apology," Crush said.
"I hope that everyone can advocate for everybody," she added.

*Jenny Kane covers arts and culture in Northern Nevada, as well as the dynamic relationship between the state and the growing Burning Man community. She also covers the state's burgeoning cannabis industry (Check out her podcast, the Potcast, on iTunes.). Support her work in Reno by subscribing to RGJ.com right here.*

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