

From Victim to Advocate

Israeli Linor Abargil, a voice for global rape victims, removes stigma from the violence

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From all outward appearances, Linor Abargil had it all.

On a whim, the Netanya, Israel native entered and won the Miss Israel beauty pageant. It was 1998, and the 18-year-old was thrilled to win a car and a trip to Thailand; she was looking forward to the upcoming Miss World pageant.

Life was good.

Then, six weeks before she was crowned Miss World in 1998, Abargil traveled to Milan, Italy, for a modeling event. There, a travel agent named Uri Shlomo, an Egyptian-born Israeli, brutally raped her at knifepoint.

Last Thursday, in partnership with Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, Z Brand Creative and the Jewish Women's Foundation, JFilm presented Abargil's documentary, "Brave Miss World," at Rodef Shalom. The film, which was shot over a five-year period, chronicles Abargil's own struggles to fight for justice, both on her own behalf and for countless rape victims around the globe.

Abargil was in Pittsburgh for the screening and held a question-and-answer session after the film. She received a standing ovation from the audience.

At once soft spoken and self-assured, Abargil said she believed that, in general, justice was served in her case (her attacker was tried, convicted and went to prison). Nonetheless, she noted that rape victims worldwide rarely get justice, adding that women were raised to blame themselves from the moment

they are born.

Ultimately, her message, which she shared with the audience, is, "We should speak up and not just to go to the police, but bring the word 'rape' to light. Shout if it happens to you."

Directed by Cecelia Peck, daughter of film star Gregory Peck, "Brave Miss World" is a compelling, firsthand examination of the lifelong and devastating aftermath of rape.

The film is an honest, gritty, no-holds-barred examination of a topic that is often spoken about in hushed tones; this film brings viewers into its reality with a thunderous roar. Abargil's external beauty is in stark contrast to the deep emotional and physical injuries she sustained in the attack.

But it's more than Abargil's personal story. She has made it her life's mission to become a global voice and dedicated advocate for rape victims worldwide, and to be the face for those rape survivors who remain anonymous.

The film chronicles how Abargil, over a period of years, has traveled the globe, educating and empowering women simply by listening to their stories, making them feel valued, validating their feelings and attempting to take the stigma out of the word "rape."

"Rape is so isolating, because even if you tell people what happened, they're afraid to mention it, so you are surrounded by sadness," she comments in the film.

The footage from the Miss World competition depicts an emotional Abargil. No outside observer would have guessed what had happened to her

a mere six weeks earlier; no one but her parents knew about the rape. In fact, Abargil credits her mother with giving her the courage to come forward and offering her the support that many rape victims do not receive.

She initially reported the rape to the Italian authorities, which dismissed the case due to lack of evidence. She also reported her attacker to Israeli authorities, and when Shlomo later flew home to Israel, he was immediately extradited and arrested.

Ultimately, Shlomo was sentenced to 16 years in prison; Abargil became instrumental in preventing his early release on parole. Shlomo's prison term is up this July.

Interwoven with Abargil's own journey, the film depicts women from all over the world, and even some men, who speak frankly about their own rape experiences. While the back and forth between Abargil's story and the stories of others was a little disjointed, it did serve to highlight the resiliency of the human spirit, as well as to shed light on these unfortunate facts: Globally, rape is severely underreported, and rarely punished. If a conviction is even won, often it amounts to no more than a slap on the wrist.

A compelling scene in the film is her visit with some rape survivors in South Africa, which leads the world in rape incidences. The film cites scary statistics, indicating that a woman in South Africa is more likely to be raped than educated.

The film also depicts a universal lack of support for rape victims on American



Chronicle photo by Lindsay Dill

Linor Abargil takes questions from the audience Thursday, April 3, after the screening of "Brave Miss World" at the 21st annual JFilm Festival. Abargil was the 1998 Miss World, and the film told her story as a victim of a violent crime.

college campuses. According to "Brave Miss World," one-fifth of college women are victims of rape or attempted rape, though only 12 percent are reported.

As part of her healing journey, Abargil returned to law school and interned with the Tel Aviv prosecutor's office, with a special interest in rape and sexual assault.

Gradually, Abargil shed her secular lifestyle for a more religious lifestyle; the evolution of this transformation is illustrated in the documentary. Today, she is married to Oron Kalfon, with whom she has three young children.

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