

## Both the Method and the Medium

### Creating a Culture of Consent and Respect



If you're lucky, you make it through life without ever receiving that phone call. The one that rearranges your entire life—makes you view the world in a different way—shatters your understanding of the way people relate to one another. Some who receive such calls never fully regain a sense of who they are. Others gain a new understanding of their place in the world. For these few, that phone call not only alters their lives but starts them on a journey to change the world around them.

For Mike Domitrz, that phone call came in fall 1989. As Domitrz began the first day of his sophomore year at Loyola University in Chicago (IL), he received a call from his mother. She informed him that his sister, Cheri, had been raped. The following year was full of pain as Domitrz dealt with the news. In spring 1991, over a year after his sister's assault, he was in the audience of a sexual assault awareness speaker's presentation to a group of college athletes. As Domitrz explains it, "His words inspired me to realize that I could make a difference." Only a few weeks later, Domitrz gave his first presentation, called "Sexual Assault Awareness and You," to a class at his former high school. Thus began his journey to turn that phone call into a new understanding of his place in the world.

Within two minutes of meeting Domitrz, it's clear why he is so effective in relaying his message. His presentation style is both intense and comfortable. He is passionate without being cheesy. He speaks the language of college students without mistakenly believing he is one. Most importantly, Domitrz's medium for relaying that message is grounded in a consistent, unmistakable ethic of respect.

Domitrz presented portions of his program "Can I Kiss You? A Candid Look at Dating, Communication, Respect, and Sexual Assault Awareness" at the 2004 ACUHO-I Annual Conference in Montréal, Canada. Domitrz's ACUHO-I presentation was subtitled "How to Connect with Students Regarding Consent and Sexual Assault Awareness." Along with exercises and activities from his regular program, Domitrz mixed in tips for student affairs professionals.

By showing the content from his "Can I Kiss You?" program and giving a behind-the-scenes look at his intentional presentation style, Domitrz revealed the importance of respect in both his message and his medium. Domitrz's message focuses on creating a culture of consent within sexual relationships. He argues for a shift from "No Means No" to a more proactive approach. Domitrz explains that although, "No Means No" is a popular message, it does not discuss how to give someone the opportunity to say, 'No' or 'Yes.' It provides only for situations where someone actually says, 'No.' The responsibility should be on the aggressor to get consent before taking action—not on the victim to stop the

crime." Domitrz opts instead for a slogan that radically demands consent before action: "Can I Kiss You?" (yes, grammatically he knows that "May" is correct). He states that his goal is "to help people understand that the only way you can absolutely know what someone is feeling, thinking, or wanting is by asking the person." This conversation creates a space for both parties to have a real choice. Although focusing on consent isn't the current politically correct trend, it is a message rooted in a belief that relationships should be founded on respect.

Domitrz's focus on respect extends beyond his demand for a culture of respect into a presentation style founded on respect. In sharing his tips for connecting to college students with the ACUHO-I delegates, Domitrz stresses that to receive students' respect, you must first give them respect. He shares that his best strategy for connecting with college students is to "simply be 'real.'" He encourages presenters to ask questions and to encourage their students to ask questions. Domitrz stresses the importance of being open-minded and never attacking a student's beliefs. He understands that the most powerful opportunities for learning can occur when a student is encouraged to answer his or her own question. Domitrz often turns students' questions back on them, showing his commitment to not acting like an expert. Domitrz knows that students "prefer conversations over lectures" and always will respect someone they find approachable.

Of course, changing a culture isn't simple. Changing an individual or even an individual's choice in one moment is even more difficult. Domitrz never leads his audience to believe that it will be easy. A unique aspect of his presentation style is a desire to present "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Domitrz finds that by giving students realistic scenarios during his presentations, he is more likely to increase his credibility. Getting specific about the details of asking for a kiss is necessary. Even students who understand the merits of the theory may have a difficult time imagining themselves using the technique. Domitrz wants to show students not only that asking is "the 'right' thing to do" but that it is also "romantic, sexy, and fun." He uses several scenarios to provide the students tools for asking. In addition to showing a perfect scenario, Domitrz believes it's important to show a "worst case scenario," which includes being rejected. By showing students how a rejection can become a positive experience, Domitrz increases the likelihood that students actually will be willing to ask during their next romantic encounter.

By treating his audiences with respect and expecting them to create a culture of respect, Domitrz is working to change aspects of our society that extend beyond sexual assault. He is teaching tools for communication and relationship-building that will serve our students not only in the world of romance but as professionals, citizens, and family members. When Domitrz connects with an audience, he gives them a chance to think about what their actions say and an opportunity to practice being who they mean to be. When speaking to a group of housing professionals, Domitrz truly speaks our language. He gives us tools for creating the environments we mean to create and illustrates the fact that one person can truly impact the larger culture.

For almost 15 years, Domitrz has been working to shape his world. Today he says he is "living a dream" as he travels and speaks at about 40 schools each semester. That phone call he

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## ***The Method and the Medium (cont.)***

received in 1989 may have altered his understanding of the way the world works. Since then, Domitrz has been working to alter the way others understand the world. Domitrz says that his greatest “Aha!” moment in his work came when his sister, Cheri, told him that she was proud of his work. She said that his work “lets her know that her assault did not happen for nothing.” For Domitrz that phone call on the first day of his sophomore year in college carried more than just painful news. It also contained a calling for a passionate life of service. Domitrz answered that call by dedicating his life to urging a culture of respect in his message and creating a culture of respect in his medium.

(More information about Mike Domitrz can be found at <http://www.canikissyou.com> or by calling (800) 329-9390.)

Submitted by  
Micaela K. Wood  
Apartment Hall Director and Judicial Administrator  
Southern Methodist University (TX)