

# SHAPING SURVIVORS

## Elizabeth Smart shares life story at WCTC during Sexual Assault Awareness Month



Ashley Haynes/Freeman Staff

Elizabeth Smart was the first in Waukesha County Technical College's Speaker Series. Smart shared her story of abduction at the school Tuesday.

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**PEWAUKEE** — When she was young, child safety advocate Elizabeth Smart said, her biggest fear was actually the movie "Jumanji." Smart said she truly had no idea what fear was until she awoke one night in 2002, when she was just 14 years old, and was abducted from her home.

Fast forward to today, as a sexual assault survivor, Smart is sharing the most difficult moments of her

life in the hope that she is able to help other survivors.

"It's a topic that I'm very passionate about. It's a topic that I care deeply about in that I go around sharing my story. I mean, I've shared the worst moments of my life — I've shared my own sexual assault and what it did to me," Smart said.

As the first in the Waukesha County Technical College Speaker Series, Smart was able to share her struggles and how she overcame them during Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

For Smart, one of the goals of sharing her story is to create a safe space for victims by letting them know they are not alone and making sure they are heard and supported.

Smart said erasing the stigma that sexual assault often carries with it is an important first step.

"When I go out and I share my story and I speak, I want to talk about what happened but I also want to provide hope to people," Smart said.

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Ashley Haynes/Freeman Staff

Child safety advocate Elizabeth Smart looks out into the sold-out gymnasium of Waukesha County Technical College Tuesday.

## Smart

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Smart said she believes we have a long way to go in making sure sexual assault survivors have the support and services they need to handle living with their personal experiences.

She said as she has traveled and shared her story, numerous other survivors have approached her to share theirs.

Smart said the statistics of sexual assault are shocking and whether we know it or not, we do know someone who has been affected.

According to the National Sexual Violence

Resource Center, 51% of females reported being raped by an intimate partner or acquaintance. Just over 52% of men reported being raped by an acquaintance.

"I have men come up to me and disclose to me (their experiences), which is even more taboo," Smart said. "This year alone, there will be over 12,000 men who are raped."

Smart said it's always important to believe those who say they've been sexually assaulted. If they are lying, Smart explained the truth will come out later, but if they aren't, not believing them can set them back tremendously

and the victim may not want to ever open up again.

Smart also shared what has helped her move forward, what that process can look like for sexual assault survivors and touched on the local Jayme Closs case. Closs was abducted at 13-years-old in Barron, Wis. by Jake Patterson. He later pleaded guilty to killing both Closs' parents and kidnapping her.

Smart said she's just on the sidelines cheering the Closs family on.

"I really haven't concerned myself with Patterson. I've been more concerned with Jayme and her healing and recovery,"

Smart said. "As far as Patterson goes, yes, I'm glad he pleaded guilty and I'm glad he stuck to that plea. That's just one less nightmare for the family to deal with."

Smart, now a married mother of three, dedicates most of her time to advocating for recovery programs, national legislation and, of course, continually sharing her story.

"I guess I won't know the full impact, maybe ever, of speaking but I know that when I go out and speak and I meet with people and I listen to their stories, I know that it at least creates the opportunity to have these conversations," Smart said.