

# Words Matter: Objectification Leads to Abuse

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There can be nothing but praise for the brave way in which Michelle Wie West stood up against the objectification of women. In my view, it is her second major championship, right up there with the 2014 U.S. Women's Open. Objectification of anyone for any reason opens the door to abuse and that cannot be tolerated.

In appearing on Steve Bannon's podcast "War Room" to discuss the passing of radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani told a story about playing golf with Limbaugh and Wie West in which he said:

"Michelle Wie is gorgeous, she's 6 feet, she has a strange putting stance. She bends all the way over and her panties show." Giuliani went on to say photographers at the charity event seven years ago cared only about Wie West and not Limbaugh or him.

Wie West was quick to respond with the mightiest of weapons: Facts, logic, morality and anger.

"What this person should have remembered from that day was the fact that I shot 64 and beat every male golfer in the field leading our team to victory," Wie West said on Instagram. "I shudder thinking that he was smiling to my face and complimenting me on my game while objectifying me and referencing my 'panties' behind my back all day."

Golf organizations jumped in quickly. The USGA Tweeted:

"Sexism has no place in golf or life. We are always in your corner Michelle Wie West."

The LPGA Tour tweeted:

“She’s a 5-time LPGA Tour winner. Major champion. LPGA Board member, elected by her peers. Stanford graduate. Working mother. We stand with Michelle Wie West.”

While we all have freedom of speech that does not mean we are free from the consequences of our words. Once we speak them, we own them. If the words hurt or demean or inspire violence, the speaker is not free from that reality.

I have the freedom to make a racist statement, but if my employer feels my words are not consistent with their corporate values or damage their brand, they have the freedom to fire me. Free speech is not to be confused with freedom from responsibility.

When women are objectified they are made more vulnerable for attack. To call them “broad” or “chick” portrays them as less than human. To play a round of golf with an enormously talented woman and come away with only the memory of her panties – and will some please tell Mr. Mayor what a Skort is – is juvenile at best and malicious at worst.

In 2007, I went to Rwanda with six LPGA Tour members on a humanitarian mission led by Hall of Famer Betsy King, her foundation Golf Fore Africa and World Vision, a Christian aid organization. I had six months to get ready for the trip so I read a lot about Rwanda. What I learned was chilling.

In 1994, there was a genocide there in which militant Hutus killed at least 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 100 days. Think of that: A nation the size of Maryland with a population of North Carolina lost the equivalent of Detroit in barely more than three months.

I also learned how the stage was set for the massacre. The Hutus established a radio station that incessantly preached hate against the Tutsis, who were never referred to as Tutsi but rather as cockroaches. Step one in the genocide was to dehumanize the people they wanted to kill. Similar dehumanization campaigns were used in the Holocaust during World War II.

It’s much easier to do harm to someone if you don’t think of them as human. They are not a Tutsi but rather a cockroach; not a Jew but a stereotype of evil; not a woman but a chick or broad or reduced to her defining characteristic being the length of her skirt.

My moral north star is bigotry. I oppose it in all its forms whether based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or economic status. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and judged on their actions not pre-judged based on what categories they fall into.

Some bigotry is so subtle – a story about panties played for a laugh, for example – that it can slide by with a wink and a smile. That casual, ingrained bigotry might be the most dangerous kind. Good on Michelle Wie West for standing up against it.

There have been words spoken in defense of Giuliani: That it was a joke, that he was talking about the photographer and not himself, that we have become too politically correct and overly sensitive.

In the end, there are only two words that matter:

**“I’m sorry.”**

That’s what Rudy Giuliani needs to say to Michelle Wie West and to all women. Words matter. Objectifying paves the path to abuse. Thank you, Michelle, for throwing up an eloquent roadblock on that path.