

The Middlebury Campus - May 4, 1990 - News

‘Take Back the Night’ protests violence against women

By Marika Holmgren

On April 25, over 150 members of the Middlebury College and town community took part in a “Take Back the Night” March in protest of domestic violence. Candles in hand, students, faculty and town members left Proctor Terrace after sunset and returned one hour later to hear four speakers address the issue of violence against women.

Coordinated by Elizabeth Toder '90, the event mirrored similar marches that have recently taken place in many cities and schools.

The march was co-sponsored by fifteen student organizations, including the six fraternities, the Women’s Union, the Department of Security and the Escort Service. The four speakers did not charge a fee to speak.

The program began at 8:00 with an opening address from Toder.

“‘Take Back the Night’ is a visible protest against violence against women. On the most basic level, this march at night involves the fear that women feel when they walk alone,” Toder said.

“[Some people] do not think that violence against women is a problem here, or a problem at all. As a woman I understand what it’s like to walk down a dark street and be afraid,” said Toder. “And I’m angry that I

have to be afraid about this, because I don't think it's right that anyone should make me feel this way."

"So I want to say that this feeling is relevant to Middlebury College and our 'safe' town. In the past year and a half, three female students have been attacked, and this is the only obvious violence that we know about," Toder said.

"This violence affects everyone. If one out of three women is raped in her lifetime, she's any man's sister, mother, girlfriend or even daughter. Women and men are victims together" concluded Toder.

The Vermont Coordinator of the National Organization of Women Mary Stevenson, gave the first address. She began by praising the college's gender report.

"I think the administration here is to be commended for having a study about the way women are treated here, and then when it turned out to be not so terrific, to publicize it. That took courage, but the first step to curing a bad problem is to shed some light on it," she said.

Stevenson proceeded to describe instances of violence against women and the attitudes that accompany this problem. Stevenson cited statistics of domestic violence, adding that "one's home can be a dark and scary place."

"We girls, women were socialized to be thoughtful, nurturing, selfless, gentle. Our brothers were socialized to be aggressive and rough.

We girl-women were taught to make things come out right," Stevenson said. "We do live in a patriarchal society, with six-thousand year old roots. It's heavy being a woman after six-thousand years of patriarchy."

Stevenson concluded by saying, "We will prevail. We will take back the night."

Facilitator of the Men's Education Project on Domestic Abuse, Bob Staley-Mays, addressed the crowd next, citing further statistics of international domestic violence. He spoke of the enormous rate of domestic violence in such countries as Thailand, India and New Guinea. According to Staley-Mays, in many of these countries women are considered infe-

rior to men, and subjugation of women is culturally sanctioned.

"In the United States, a woman is beaten every fifteen seconds. Four women are killed every day by their batterers," he said.

Staley-Mays referred to the problem of violence against women as the war waged by men against women.

"All of this is part of a war that isn't covered in the newspapers. It's not called a war," he said.

He concluded by inviting men from the audience to speak with him about his organization that counsels offenders of violence against women.

Member of the Board of Directors of the Women in Crisis Center in

Bristol, Tracey Monteferrario '91, stressed the need for people to speak out, to be active and vocal in this issue.

“When you hear a sexist joke, I
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need you to say, ‘ Hey that isn’t funny. ’
When you see things around campus that advocate violence against women, I need you to go to the Deans and say something,” she said. “When you hear that so-and-so was drunk and he hit his girlfriend, I need you to realize that drunkenness is no excuse.” Monteferrario said.

She observed the tenth anniversary of the Vermont Abuse Prevention Act, which provides legal protection to victims of domestic violence, and “is designed to help women take back the night in their own homes.” She said that the law has been amended and strengthened every year since its inception except for one. The amendment that is currently before the state senate entails more severe penalties if a man violates the “relief from abuse” order, which is comparable to a restraining order. This amendment would also order the batterer into counseling.

“We are thankful to have this law, but even this is not enough: we need to continue working, to continue educating adults and children that violence does not solve problems, that violence does not prove one’s strength or manliness. We need to tell people that the abuse of women will not be tolerated any longer,” she said.

Jessica Lindert '90 concluded the program by addressing the issue from the point of view that the causes and affects of violence against women go beyond the individuals involved. She said that she feels the message from society is that women are secondary and women are treating as "objects, there for men's use and abuse."

"What a lot of men think is the solution is to edit their behavior around women. This is part of the problem," Lindert said. "When you make sexist jokes and use sexist language, you're accepting and advocating society's message that women are objects, the extreme expression of this message being rape and violence against women."

Lindert stressed Monteferrario's statement that people must become more involved in the fight to stop violence against women, and that before women will feel comfortable reporting instances of violence, they must not be afraid of the reaction that will follow.

"Students on campus do have to be vocal about it. And this campus has got to become more open and accepting of women so they can come forward with these instances. There is on this campus violence."

Lindert says that while she personally takes a more "hard-line" approach to the issue, the "polite" manner in which Take Back the Night was presented was appropriate and that "for this campus, that is what was needed, but it's important that this be looked at as a first step."

One Chi Psi brother who attended the march felt that the march had positive effects with regard to bringing the issue to light.

“Within such a highly sheltered environment, the whole concept of violence against women is easily tucked away; something like this forces you to open your eyes and take a closer look,” he said.

“As a guy, so many of these things don’t naturally occur to you.” He continued, “They’re not ignored out of insensitivity, they just exist outside of your realm of experience, something like this gives you a different perspective and in doing so, helps you to understand.”

Another marcher added, "For me this was a definite first step towards a heightened awareness of the problem that exists."