

## Middlebury students march to take back the night

By Rebecca Plona

On Thursday, April 16, members of the college community took part in the annual "Take Back the Night" march and rally, featuring candlelight march, music by Alicia Mathewson '92, a speaker, and an open microphone session. This year's march was organized by Sara Weale '92, Lisa Darak '92, and Tracey Merrill '92.

"Take Back the Night" marches began in the early 1970s in response to the dangers posed to people, especially women, during the nighttime hours. Since then, the marches have spread and are now held annually on college campuses and in towns nationwide. "It was started because women were sick of being afraid at night," said Weale.

Following a presentation by Susan Sweetser, founder of Survivors of Crime and a survivor of sexual assault herself, an open mike session was held in Upper Proctor, at which women were encouraged to share their experiences with others.

Sweetser related the story of her own sexual assault eleven years ago at the hands of a man she stopped to help on a Vermont country road. She told the audience of her ordeal in graphic detail, and her struggle with the Vermont criminal justice system to get this man, a prior sex offender, convicted. She struggled for eleven and a half years with the Vermont courts, trying to find justice and was met with disap-

pointment, disinterest, and failure.

“I went to the system looking for

justice,” she said of her court experiences, “and after two years, I had found none. After four years it became humiliating. After nine years we realized that the court doors were closed to us.”

Sweetser decided in 1990 to go public with her story in the hopes of aiding other victims of violent crime, be it sexual or physical assault, abuse, or domestic violence. She founded Survivors of Crime that same year with another woman who had also been raped. The Vermont organization, which has dedicated itself to working for legislation that will protect the victims of crimes, now has about 1200 members.

“It’s time to stop focusing on the victim’s conduct, and start focusing on the offender’s,” she told the group. “It’s not what the women do wrong, it’s what the men do wrong.”

When the open mike session began, students who were victims of a violent crime, or close to someone who was, got up to speak in front of the group. Some of the survivors spoke of their own ordeals. Others tried to share their frustration and fear. Still others gave advice to the audience on dealing with an assault, or how to prevent one.

One survivor expressed frustration with the lack of safety measures on campus—namely, poor lighting and lack of emergency phones, which can be found on many campuses across the country. According to the speaker, the

administration felt that until proof of need was demonstrated, these safety measures were unnecessary.

“Why do we have to wait for an attack to happen before something is done?” she asked. “Nobody should have to feel this way.”

Another survivor advised the crowd  
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to be careful at all times. “Taking back the night is really important,” she said, “but the day is really scary too. It can happen anytime.”

Yet another survivor stressed the importance of the unity of people in preventing all types of violence. “Everyone - male, female, white, black, must unite to take back the night.”

Organizers of the march and rally were overwhelmed at the response. “I think that all of us, especially the organizers, were amazed by the response from the men and women in the audience,” said Darak. “Overall it was just amazing . . . that kind of sharing of people’s voices is what needs to happen for (other) people to understand these issues.”

Mathewson perhaps expressed the message of the night best in an original song she performed for the crowd.

“No matter how strong you feel,” she sang, “violence can still be real.”