

**The Middlebury Campus - May 4, 1995 - Features**

## **Middlebury empowered by Take Back the Night**

By Lilia Gerberg

Sexual assault is not a pretty topic, not one that many people want to talk about, and not a common dinner subject at Proctor. However, it is a problem and it occurs throughout the country, in Vermont, and yes, even at Middlebury College.

Last week, members of the Coalition for Feminist Consciousness worked to educate people about assault against women with a series of events. Thanks to the intensive efforts of seniors Jen Kupperman, Brooke McDonald and Tina Bucholz, Middlebury College held Take Back The Night.

The original Take Back the Night was held in San Francisco in 1978. Its purpose was to empower women to feel comfortable without the fear of rape and assault constantly hanging over them.

The idea spread to other universities and colleges. At large universities, Take Back the Night is usually just one day, and participants stay out all night long.

Kupperman got the idea to bring Take Back the Night to Middlebury after she attended a sexual assault awareness conference at Columbia University this past February break.

Kupperman realized that because of the size of our campus, the event could not

be held at quite the same level as at some of the bigger universities.

She also considered the fact that the majority of students at Middlebury might never have heard of Take Back the Night.

Therefore, she was faced with the challenge of engaging students and faculty and reaching as many many people as possible.

Last week was sexual assault awareness week, with five days filled with numerous activities culminating with the Take Back The Night march on on Thursday.

All the events over the course of the week helped raise awareness and educate people about violence against women.

Violence against women does in fact occur on the Middlebury campus although it is often silenced or ignored.

There was a diverse range of activities in order to involve and educate different groups of people. The first activity occurred on Sunday, April 23, when students gathered in front of McCullough to make white candles which would be carried during the march.

People walking by saw the candle making and some stopped to observe, and in this way the event contributed to awareness.

On Monday evening, there was a self-defense workshop, organized in part by Edna-May King '95. King has earned a black belt in karate and she invited her master to campus to

teach an introductory course.

The session lasted almost two hours, and although students learned but a few basics, it was still very empowering. It imparted the idea that no matter how big an assailant is, the would-be victim still has a way to defend herself. The power dynamics are not necessarily fixed.

On Tuesday evening, Jean Kilbourne's film, "Still Killing Us Softly" was shown in the Undergrad. Kilbourne is a dynamic speaker who has spoken at Middlebury in past years.

Her engaging and informative film is about media depictions of women and the how media tends to promote and perpetuate the degradation of and violence against women. Most of the piece was filmed at a lecture Kilbourne gave at Harvard University a few years ago, and it included some heart-wrenching statistics concerning child abuse, acquaintance rape, spousal abuse and murder.

On a different note, the next evening storytellers performed in the Gamut Room. Abi Sessions and Joan Robbinson told funny, fictitious stories with female heroines. The stories were modernized fairy tales involving powerful women. The storytellers put empowerment on a light and humorous level, and everyone in the packed room seemed to thoroughly enjoy the show.

All these events led up to the main event - the march on Thursday night.

A few members of the CFC brought a ribbon tree to dinner at Proctor,

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where students tied purple ribbons to it.

The “tree” is a large, wooden construction in the shape of the woman symbol. Each ribbon attached to it honors a woman who has been abused.

Someone can tie on a ribbon for a friend, for herself, or simply with the knowledge that there is a deserving woman out there, who needs the support.

After dinner, the ribbon tree was carried over to Chellis House, where it will make its permanent home. Kupperman hopes that it will remain there, and that perhaps new colors can be added each year.

Men and women started congregating outside Chellis House at 7:30 p.m., and when it was dark, they lit the candles that had been made on Sunday by students and members of the community. From there, they marched across campus, from Mead Chapel to Old Chapel, to Warner to Pearsons, and finally on to Ross Lounge.

The marchers were accompanied by Womansing, an accapella group from Addison County who also performed during Earth Week.

The marchers sang during the candlelit procession, and then entered Ross Lounge, where Womansing performed for forty-five minutes.

Buccholz, McDonald and Kupperman all spoke, and Kupperman explained the purpose of Take Back the Night: "We are here because violence against women does happen. We unite as survivors, unite as friends of survivors, unite as women."

People then had the option of returning to Chellis House for further discussion about any subject matter.

The regular Friday night dinner at Chellis House was dedicated to reactions and reflections on the past week. Take Back the Night was a massive undertaking and a great deal of work went into it.

Assuredly, it did raise awareness in the college community and hopefully it will remain a tradition at Middlebury.