

'Take Back the Night' rally unites survivors of sexual assault

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Allies show up in solidarity

It was a time of healing and empowerment for survivors of sexual assault at the “Take Back the Night” event held April 21 at the McKinley County Courthouse Plaza.

This was the first public outreach event coordinated by the Sexual Assault Services of Gallup, in hopes of bringing sexual awareness to the community. It began at 6 pm with a march from the Sexual Assault Services offices located at 111 S. First St. to the downtown courthouse.

Victim Advocate Prevention Educator Jill Draven said this would be a time for the community to come together, pulling strength, sharing stories, and empowering the people as well as the survivors who came to this event.

“We just wanted the public to give strength to the victim survivors,” Draven said, “as well as inform them of prevention techniques, services we have to offer and to just let them know that we are there for them.”

As a Prevention Educator, Draven spoke to the crowd on what sexual assault perpetrators look for in a victim.

“Perpetrators look for the right person when it comes to sexual violence – and often it is planned. People have this idea that the perpetrator just wakes up and decides to assault someone that day, it’s not that at all - it is something that is planned and they are looking for the right person” she said.

The organization frequently conducts prevention education, mainly the youth, to educate them about preventing an assault. She also spoke about the common patterns of control in abusers who don’t want their victims to make decisions on their own.

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Spectators closely listened as Draven spoke about what “dating violence” looks like; safety awareness, and what red flags look like in regard to power and control in a relationship.

Draven with her crew of two, Summer Morez and Kimberly Martin, respond to local hospitals when a victim is brought in either by local law enforcement or by themselves. She said an average of five calls per month come into the office for sexual assaults. Draven said this could even fluctuate to 10 or more at times.

According to Draven, the numbers of reported assaults went down during Covid. The numbers, she said, were down due to the fact that victims were scared to come to the hospital.

“But now that things are returning to normal, the numbers are rising,” she said.

Aside from law enforcement, Draven says calls also come from the local hospitals such as Gallup Indian Medical Center or Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital.

Draven and her coworkers are always on-call and will meet with the victim survivor, and this usually happens in the dead of the night. They go over the services and how they can help them, which includes finding them a safe place to stay and making sure they have something to eat.

They help the victim get their SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) examination done. That's where they collect all of the evidence of the alleged incident that can be used to prosecute the perpetrator. Then the ladies accompany the victim to court, especially if a temporary restraining order has been filed against the alleged rapist.

Draven says transportation to get a victim back to their home has been a challenge, as well as getting the victim to the hospital if they live far away in rural areas. So, they could really use more volunteers to help with transportation.

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"Volunteers have survivors come up to us and thank us for being there, and that is very rewarding," she said. "When we meet them for the first time at the hospital they are a bit nervous because we are strangers. But we get to know them closely, and are even there through the court process, helping them get the justice they deserve."

VICTIM SURVIVOR

Meskee Yatsayte is a courageous survivor who said she suffered child molestation and attempted rape. Now she has a voice to empower the community.

Her torment began as a small child growing up in Oklahoma, when her mother's common-law husband sexually molested her for three years.

"To me he was a monster," she said. "I was unable to tell anyone, he told me that if I told my mom or anyone that he would kill me as well as my mother."

Yatsayte said he displayed guns around the house where she was living.

"He was very famous for carrying a loaded weapon," she said.

She kept this secret until she was 14 years-old. She revealed the painful news to her mom, thinking this would subside her inner fears and the trauma. However, revealing the abuse only increased her rebellion. Suicide was always in her realm of thinking.

She turned to alcohol, but reached a turning point when she was almost raped by a man in a truck.

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“Luckily my cousin was at the party and saw what was going to take place, she [cousin] quickly opened the truck door and began to hit the guy,” she said.

That moment changed Yatsayte forever.

“I couldn’t be a victim anymore, I didn’t want to go through that ever again, so I changed my life right there. I quit drinking and I never went anywhere alone anymore, I started to learn how to defend myself, and I’ve been different ever since then,” she said.

Sometime later, the man who molested Yatsayte, was mysteriously murdered.

She speaks to others about breaking the cycle and voices her strength for Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women.

Meanwhile, later in the evening, a candlelight vigil was held for those who have lost their lives due to sexual assaults and for victim survivors such as Yatsayte.

According to Summer Morez, a victim advocate, the event turned out good and getting the word out was accomplished.

“We came out here to raise awareness and that’s what we accomplished. Great stories were shared as well as creating this place — a safe place for those who shared their stories,” Morez said. “A lot of survivors share their stories, to have that courage and to give it to others still struggling with daily trauma ... to let them know we believe them and together we can change things.”

Morez says in light of how well the march and vigil went this year, they are planning more events for next year.

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For more information contact Sexual Assault Services at 505-399-5940 or visit them on their website www.sasnwnm.org or SAS Rape Crisis Hotline: 505-326-4700 or 1-866-908-4700 National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE

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