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Taking back the night

Event raises awareness about violence against women and sexual assault

BY KRISTIN PRICE For The Dominion Post

Cold weather didn't keep the Take Back the Night rally participants from supporting the cause Thursday night.

The event, which was sponsored by the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, the WVU Center for Women's Studies, and the Morgantown chapter of the National Organization for Women, was scheduled to take place at the Mountainlair, but was moved to the Lutheran Church on University Avenue.

The event had several speakers, including Deb Strouse, with the WVU Sexual Assault Prevention Program; Ruth Kershner, from the Health Sciences Center; Carrie Ross-Stone, an activist lawyer; Teresa Miller, Morgantown City Councilwoman; and Barbara Evans-Fleischauer, a member of the House of Delegates. In addition to the speakers, the night also included a candlelight vigil, which is a tradition for this event.

Traditionally, the rally begins at the Mountainlair with several speakers opening the event. After the speeches, the group usually marches from the Mountainlair down High Street toward the Monongalia County Courthouse Square. Equipped with home-made banners, the group chants as they march.

The purpose of the rally is to raise awareness in the community regarding violence against women and sexual assault.

"It's nice to get the information out there, and it's nice to have people who are willing to stand up and say they're strongly opposed to violence against women," said Jessi Kalvitis, a participant.

In previous rallies, after ending the march at the courthouse square, the group would hold a candlelight vigil. This vigil served as an open forum to anyone who wished to speak about the issues at hand. The vigil has also included a moment of silence for all victims and survivors of sexual assault, violence and hate crimes.

"I hope [the event] conveyed awareness about services for rape and domestic violence. I hope that people got enough information so that in the future they know who they can contact for help should they ever need it," said rally coordinator Lauren Wallace. "We also hope that we were able to build self esteem for the participants and raise awareness in the community."

Though this rally was sponsored locally, Take Back the Night is an international event that takes place throughout the year, mostly across different college campuses. There is not a set date for the event, though many groups choose April to hold their rallies because it is National Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

The event stems from a similar rally held in Belgium in 1976 when a group of women protested violent crimes against women throughout the world.

Though the group has a positive message, they don't always receive a positive response from the student body or the community, Kalvitis said. Many students and community members are supportive, while others are not.

"A lot of the time people see these issues as too personal to be talked about in public or they feel there is a shame or stigma attached to it. Because of these feelings, many people don't see it as a high profile issue," Kalvitis said.

While marching along the route, participants have sometimes heard negative remarks from bystanders.

"Most students are very supportive; occasionally, however, we have had certain fraternity organizations stand on their porches and boo or say rude comments as we march past," Wallace said.

"On the other hand, we also have had people from the Boreman Residence Halls come outside and clap as we walk by. It depends on the individuals that we encounter each year. Some show support and some make fun of the issue."

Despite the occasional negative aspects, such as hecklers, the organizers of the event feel the rally was successful. The main goals of the rally were to raise awareness to anyone who will listen.

"This is a big event for victims and survivors. Anytime you can get victims and survivors to see their community support them, it's a success," Wallace said.

"It is very relevant to survivors and victims of these crimes. The more comfortable people feel discussing these issues, the more knowledgeable the community can be to seek help or prevent violence against them selves."



Todd Flint/ The Dominion Post photos **Barbara Evans-Fleischauer (left)** speaks to the crowd during the annual Take Back the Night rally in Morgantown Thursday evening. Fortune Dobbs (above, from left), Megan McCarthy and Rachel Mathers hold their candles during the candlelight vigil at the rally.