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Ithaca community takes back the night



Participants listen to a speaker at Ithaca Take Back the Night on April 24 at Dewitt Park in Ithaca.

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On an unseasonably cold April night, more than 50 Ithaca College students participated in a march from the college into downtown Ithaca to take part in Ithaca Take Back the Night 2015, an annual event supporting survivors of sexual and domestic violence and envisioning an end to such crimes.

Ithaca Take Back the Night 2015, which according to the event's Facebook page, "began to reclaim the night for women from the fear of walking alone at night," took place April 24 in Dewitt Park. It featured survivors of rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse and domestic violence sharing their

experiences through modes of communication including spoken word, poetry, music, comedy and storytelling. Advocates and allies of survivors of sexual violence were also invited to speak to the more than 150 people in attendance.

Event organizers handed out armbands as people arrived. A blue armband signified someone who identified as an ally to survivors of crimes of sexual and domestic violence, while purple armbands were worn by those who wished to identify as survivors of these crimes. There were also people with orange armbands, signifying the people who helped plan the event, and individuals with pink armbands, signifying the staff of the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County. Organizers said the armband system was optional, and no one was forced to identify as either a survivor or an ally if they did not choose to.

Kristi Taylor, adult community educator with the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, the lead organizer of the event, said the armbands had a very specific purpose.

“I think the ... power of the armbands is for survivors to be able to look around and see so many other people around who have experienced similar things and are there and building this kind of network,” Taylor said.

She said this year was the 34th year of Take Back the Night in Ithaca. Taylor said Take Back the Night is planned by a community collective made up of college and high school students as well as members of the community.

Despite the adverse weather conditions, many people stayed for the entire event, which spanned two hours and featured the stories of survivors interspersed with musical performances and guest speakers. The event then concluded with a candlelight vigil, along with a musical performance and finally a moment of silence for those who could not be there because of crimes of sexual and domestic violence.

Take Back the Night is the culmination of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, which occurs every April. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, “one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.” In addition, according to research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before the age of 18.

In November 2014, the Tompkins County Legislature unanimously adopted a resolution “recognizing that freedom from domestic violence is a fundamental human right.” In adapting the resolution, Tompkins County became the 14th locality in the country to do so and the first rural community.

Taylor said Take Back the Night has received a large turnout historically, but that this year’s event seemed to be even bigger than usual.

“I think it is a testament to all the Sexual Assault Awareness Month organization that happened by the student organizations this year, which is really exciting to see,” Taylor said.

Before the event, participants marched to Dewitt Park from three locations: Ithaca College, Cornell University and the Greater Ithaca Activities Center. The Ithaca College march left from the Textor Circle shortly after 6:15 p.m. and was organized by the student organization Feminists United.

The march led students, many of whom sported posters advocating for the sexual rights of all people, down Hudson Street and into The Commons. Along the way, sophomore Alexa Salvato, co-president of Feminists United, led students in a number of chants about the issue of sexual and domestic violence. A few of the chants included “Yes means yes, no means no! Whatever we wear, wherever we go!” and “We have the power, we have the right! The streets are ours, take back the night!”

Salvato said she was pleased with the number of students who showed up to march.

“I thought it was a really good showing,” Salvato said. “It was probably equal to or more than last year. We had a big diversity of people ... there were people from all over campus there, which was really nice.”

Sophomore Taylor Ford said he participated in the march and subsequent event because he believes people need to feel secure in their environment.

“It’s terrible that people don’t feel safe on our campus and that people, especially women, experience violence and sexual violence here,” Ford said.

Jessica Braham, a sophomore, said she believes more attention needs to be paid to the issue of sexual and domestic violence.

“This is an extremely important cause that I think needs to be recognized, especially among college students,” Braham said. “And as a survivor and friend of survivors, I want to march for the people who can’t be here right now and for everyone who hasn’t had the opportunity to do something like this.”

Also present at the march were members of the Reserve Officers Training Corps of Ithaca College. Sophomore Patrick McFaul, a member of ROTC, said the army has a high rate of sexual assault, which is something he said needs to change.

“That’s why we’re going above and beyond in any way we can to take steps not just toward bringing sexual assault down in the army and the military but just everywhere in general, especially on college campuses,” McFaul said.

Salvato said the level of interest and participation in Take Back the Night from students at the college and the community in general shows the seriousness in addressing these problems.

“I think that this event is a really tangible demonstration of community action to end sexual violence,” Salvato said.

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