Ithaca rallies to support victims of domestic abuse, violence

By: NICHOLAS BOGEL-BURROUGH | April 27, 2015

Ithaca, N.Y. — At the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, a crowd of about 25 continued to wait, hoping more people would show up for the community march to Dewitt Park.

“Tonight’s the night! It will be a chilly one,” warned a post on the event’s Facebook page. It seemed the cold might keep people away from Ithaca’s Take Back the Night gathering on Friday.

Once the march began, buses and cars honked in approval, but inadvertently drowned out the chants of “sexist, rapist, anti-gay, you can’t take our night away!”
However, as the marchers rounded the corner of Cayuga Street, they were greeted by more than 250 people already at Dewitt Park, making it clear that local residents – as well as students who marched from IC and Cornell – had chosen to endure the weather in order to support survivors of sexual assault, honor those who lost their lives, and work toward the goal of eliminating domestic violence.

“Year after year, survivors and allies come out, rain, sleet, or snow to speak out against domestic and sexual violence and make our community a better place for all,” said Tiffany Greco, education director for the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County.

**Background of the event**

Ithaca hosted the event for the first time in 1979 after the TB'IN movement expanded to the US from its roots in Europe in the late 1960s. The public has come together for 36 years since then, creating open forums and marches in order to take back the night from rapists who have made the darkness something many fear.

“Take Back the Night is a time of celebrations, triumphs, and struggles, where all people can support survivor’s strength and courage while working to change the culture that perpetuates domestic and sexual violence in our lives,” Common Council member Deborah Mohlenhoff said to the large crowd, kicking off the event.

Local artists played songs, college students read poems, and neighborhood activist groups channeled the performers’ energy into inspiration for change.

Three law students who are members of the Global Gender Justice Law School Clinic at Cornell spoke about their work with the Advocacy Center.

Late last year, these two organizations jointly proposed legislation declaring freedom from domestic violence a human right. Tompkins County passed the proposal in November of 2014, becoming the first rural community in the nation to do so. Since then, Lansing, Cayuga Heights, and, most recently, the City of Ithaca have followed suit.

After the lectures and performances, the speak-out portion of the event began. Attendees were invited to step up to the microphone and share anything connecting to the topic at hand.

**Sharing stories**
Fifteen community members related painfully personal stories of sexual assault, stories of friends who didn’t act on victims’ pleas for help, stories of rapists who believed they had done nothing wrong.

The gathering was a space where women were able to confront the terrible acts committed against them and know that they were disclosing this information in an understanding and caring atmosphere.

As the narratives added up and the sun went down, more and more members of the crowd began to hold each other, huddle under blankets, and cry into their friends’ arms. But they also began cheering more and more loudly in support of the brave survivors who recounted their nightmares.

Once the speak-outs ended, a candlelight vigil was held for those lost at the hands of domestic violence, nearly 1,500 women every year.

Lyn Staack, youth community educator for the Advocacy Center, invited attending teens to come back to her office after the rally for brownies and hot chocolate, where the discussion continued.

“It gave us time to connect the dots between the stories we’ve heard and the larger problem those stories are representative of,” said Olivia Salomon, co-president of the Strong Women Impacting Society club at IHS, “they’re more than just isolated incidents.”

The conversation at the Advocacy Center continued until almost 11 p.m., as it did in many diners, cafés, and homes throughout Tompkins County that night.

*(If you or someone you know has experienced domestic or sexual violence and needs support, please call the Advocacy Center's 24-hour hotline at 607-277-5000.)*