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Clothesline Project Aims to Educate about Rape

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Personal stories of rape, sexual violence, pain and survival will be on display today in Schoenberg quad.

The stories will appear on dozens of T-shirts, painted by survivors of sexual violence over the last six years at UCLA, the Santa Monica Rape Treatment Center and the Sexual Assault Crisis Agency in Long Beach.

Today through Thursday, the UCLA Clothesline Project will display the shirts in an effort to expose the community to the realities of sexual violence.

In the campaign against rape, education is of paramount importance because sexual violence is often shrouded in a web of taboos, myths and misconceptions, advocates and educators say.

“It is something that we choose not to actively recognize,” said Lisa White, a fourth-year English and women’s studies student and co-chair of this year’s Clothesline Project.

“Our culture is structured in a way to allow us not to recognize it and how prominent it is,” White said.

And sexual violence is dramatically under-reported, said Christina Walsh, spokeswoman for the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. Walsh said only a small percentage of rapes are reported, and those that are reported are very rarely prosecuted, which in turn deters victims from coming forward.

Because rape is under-reported, statistics are difficult to pin down, but the 2000 National College Women Sexual Victimization Study estimates that between 20 and 25 percent of college women were either raped or experienced an attempted rape during their college years. And in 1992, The National Women’s Study found that 84 percent of women who were raped did not report it to the police.

Walsh said community education is a crucial part of dealing with and combating sexual violence. She said public education about sexual violence increases the chances that a victim will have someone supportive and helpful to talk to, and it increases the chance of a fair trial when a rape is reported to the police.

She said the popular myths and misconceptions about sexual violence decrease the likelihood of a fair trial, and “it is very important to understand that we are educating juries.”

And education is the main focus of the Clothesline Project.

“I think educating about the reality behind those stereotypes is the first step to changing them,” White said.

Jesse Gaskell, the other co-chair of this year’s Clothesline Project, said the project’s mission is twofold: to make the campus community realize that sexual violence affects all social groups, genders and ethnicities, and help survivors through the healing process.

“We offer survivors an outlet to turn something painful into something productive,” said Gaskell, a fourth-year international development studies student.

The Clothesline Project gives survivors of sexual violence a chance to tell their stories by painting them on shirts, which are later displayed in public places like college campuses. Family members and friends of people who have died as a result of sexual violence can also make shirts.

White said it makes a big difference for survivors to “come out,” and the Clothesline Project allows people to “address the dark places in our society.” She said many people have told her they were survivors when they found out about her involvement in the project, a fact which she takes to mean that the project is working.

The numbers may confirm her feeling. Tina Oakland, director for the UCLA Center for Women and Men, said the number of students who come in for counseling goes up during the Clothesline Project. Oakland called the Clothesline Project powerful and effective, both for the community and for the people involved.

She said the sheer volume of individual stories that are displayed makes it hard “to stick your head in the sand and pretend that is it not a societal problem.” And several years ago, when Oakland made a shirt for someone who died after being pushed from a train, she found the experience unexpectedly moving.

“One of the things about making a shirt is it goes back to the emotional and tactile experiences we had as kids,” she said. “That physical property seems to free up people; when you look at the line, you can see that it is a cathartic and freeing experience.”

For the duration of the project, there will be an enclosed tent near the line where people can make shirts. Oakland said people may also arrange to make shirts at the Center for Women and Men.

The shirts will be displayed from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the Schoenberg quad today through Thursday. The program will culminate with an event called “Take Back the Night” from 5 to 10 p.m. on Thursday with speakers, music, a speak-out, a candlelight vigil and a march through Westwood.

This year, the project's outreach committee has focused on uniting the community around the problem of sexual violence and the idea that "supporters don't have to be survivors," White said.

The Center for Women and Men will also offer several workshops during the Clothesline Project focusing on preventing sexual violence. On Wednesday from 1 to 2 p.m., Matt Bean, men's programs and outreach coordinator for the UCLA Center for Women and Men, will be leading a workshop called "How Men Can Be Allies."

"Basically, what it comes down to is trying to change men's perceptions of what it means to be a man," Bean said.

Bean said his program does not in any way attack men, but looks at how men and women are socialized and how the socialization process can lead to sexual violence.

The workshop aims to expose the social dogma that teaches men to be dominating and physically overpowering. Bean said this binary image of men as dominant and women as submissive, combined with a number of misconceptions about sexual violence, or "rape myths," is one factor that allows rape to occur.

Bean said these rape myths – like the ideas that sexual assault is provoked by provocative clothing or that going into someone's room is equivalent to consenting to sex – confuse people about what constitutes sexual violence.

"It has become so normalized that they don't even think of it as something wrong," Bean said. He gave the example that some men consider it normal to go out at night, get drunk and have sex, but they sometimes fail to realize that if they have sex with someone without consent, it is rape, even if that person had been drinking.

He said he hopes to help men become comfortable to challenge these myths by telling "counter-stories," instead of implicitly perpetuating them by remaining silent.

Bean has been leading the men-as-allies program for about a year, but this year it will be run concurrently with the Clothesline Project for the first time.

Oakland said reaching out to men is essential because, though most men would never commit sexual violence, most perpetrators are men. She said men can combat sexual violence by monitoring their own behavior, their friends' behavior and being willing to ask questions before initiating sex.

"Often what sexual violence educators talk about is danger-mitigation because they are not stopping the act," she said. "They are really talking about how to reduce the possibility of harm rather than talking about changing attitudes that create a rape culture in the first place. That is putting the cart before the horse."

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