

# CHI-TOWN DAILY NEWS

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## Prom event aims to curb teen dating violence

BY RASHANAH BALDWIN

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A prom dinner menu of hot dogs, deep-dish pizza, burgers and soda would appeal to most teenagers. But earnest talk about domestic violence isn't something that would come up at most proms.

Police and social service agencies are trying to change that through a variety of tactics, including a recent Englewood event dubbed Prom Party with a Purpose.

Sgt. Maude Noflin, who runs the Chicago Police Department's Domestic Violence Program, says she wanted to find creative ways to reach out to teens regarding domestic violence and teen dating violence.

"A lot of the kids were unable to attend [prom] because of domestic violence in the home," she says.

Statistics indicate that teens between 16 and 19 years old are among the most at risk of being abused by an intimate partner compared with other age groups.

When the singer Rihanna was allegedly abused earlier this year by her boyfriend, Chris Brown, that shined a bright light on the problem. The incident came shortly after National Teen Violence Awareness and Prevention Week in February.

Nationwide, data collected by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that, between 1993 and 2005, domestic violence against teenagers declined.

But even still, in 2005, teenagers between 16 and 19 years old were among the most at risk of being abused by an intimate partner, with a rate of 5.7 incidents per 1,000 women. But that's much lower than the 1995 peak for that age group, when there were 22.3 incidents per 1,000 females.

"Crime in general has been decreasing over time, so the trends are pretty much the same for whatever you look at," says Patsy Klaus, a statistician with the Bureau of Justice Statistics in Washington, D.C.

A 2004 study by the Young Women's Action Team in Rogers Park, which surveyed 300 teenagers, found that 11 percent had been in an abusive relationship and 62 percent knew someone who had been.

That same year, the city of Chicago's Domestic Violence Help Line received 430 calls from teens experiencing relationship violence.

"The sense is, among advocates like myself and certainly service providers, there is a big problem and there is a big need," says Wendy Pollack, the director of the Women's Law and Policy Project at the

Shriver Center.

She suspects domestic violence incidents are underreported, especially among teens, an assertion that Department of Justice reports also make.

This year's Prom Party With Purpose, held at St. Bernard Hospital in Englewood, was open to all Chicago high school students. Teens got front row seats for a fashion show of prom dresses and tuxedos and participated in a raffle for prom wear.

"We wanted to take a proactive approach to teen dating violence," says Officer Clarita Cross. She hopes that teens came away from the event able to recognize healthy and unhealthy teen dating behavior.

Charemi Jones, the children's coordinator at the domestic violence nonprofit Family Rescue, told the teens that one in five women will be raped at prom, because forced sexual activity is the highest among prom season. In most cases it is a teen's first sexual experience, first alcoholic drink or first drug experience.

"It's OK to say no," Jones says. "You really should know who you are dating. You want someone who you can take home to Mom and Dad."



Charemi Jones addresses teens at the prom party / By Tunisia Fortson

Jones says in two years, she has talked to over 500 students. Half of them have been in a violent relationship, she says. Jones agrees that there has been a rise in teen violence in general but can only speculate as to why.

A lot of the teens will not talk to adults, out of fear they will be shunned and not respected. Instead, many teens look to their peers for support and approval, domestic violence workers say.

"TV promotes this unacceptable behavior and makes it seem OK," Jones says. "Teens grow up wanting to be a part of the circle that condones it."

Eighteen-year-old Erika Moon, a senior at Harper High School, just purchased a royal green spaghetti strap dress. Moon came to the Prom Party With a Purpose with her grandmother Barbara Carol so she could learn more about fashion and safety tips.

"I want her to come home still a virgin. It would be nice to know that there is still an eighteen year old virgin on the Southside in Englewood that's still a virgin," says Carol.

Moon doesn't want to do anything crazy, like drinking. "No prom babies," she says.

Domestic violence divided her family at a young age. Since she was a baby, her grandmother has been raising her and her four brothers. Carol says domestic violence affects the entire family.

Chicago Designers Tennille White and Lauren Lein helped teens find prom attire. Lein and White donated clothing from their collections and raffled them off at the party.

"If you can't wear underwear under it, you can't wear it outside," says White.

Stephanie Tatum of the YWCA says that teen dating violence normally increases around holidays, because confrontation occurs between the teens. She also believes that the exposure starts in the home and teens are emulating what they are exposed to at an early age.

"We live in a country that is entertained by violence," says Tatum. "We get entertained by violence through our music, through movies, through television programs. We as parents are not parenting."

Through the various Domestic Violence Programs and Teen Violence Dating Programs, Noflin, the CPD sergeant, wants to provide an outlet for teens that might be experiencing violence in the home.

She encourages people who need help to contact the Domestic Violence Program at 312-745-6340.

~ Staff Writer Peter Sachs contributed to this report.