



**Dawn Turner Trice**

## Morse Avenue harassment calls for action

**A**long a section of Morse Avenue in East Rogers Park, young men hang out in clusters—near the liquor store, the currency exchange, the Laundromat, under the train station—and “catcall” to the young women, some as young as 10 years old, who walk down the street.

It would be harassing enough if they just said, “Hey baby, why don’t you smile?” But sometimes they touch. They pull hair. I saw one young man yank a girl’s clothing. Sometimes they even follow the girls, taunting them and calling them foul names.

For some girls, learning how to navigate parts of Morse Avenue, where unemployed young men hang out, has become a rite of passage, part of a sad initiation into adulthood. On their way to and from school, they’ve learned to take zigzag routes around the guys, crossing the street in the middle of a block before crossing back over. Or they jog past the loiterers or walk in groups. Some girls admit carrying pocket knives or pepper spray.

Last year, area youths were invited to a community forum. Most organizers expected students to talk about drugs and gangs and violence. And they did. But overwhelmingly, the girls spoke about how threatened they felt while walking along Morse Avenue.

So Mariame Kaba, with Friends of Battered Women and Their Children, one of the sponsors of the community forum, asked the girls what they thought could be done. Initially, most said what amounted to: “Nothing. Men will be men. Boys will be boys.”

“Only two girls said they believed differently,” Kaba said. “I met with those two girls and they said they wanted to find out whether other girls in the community felt the same way.”

Last summer, six more girls joined those two, and the young women, age 16 to 18, dubbed themselves the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team. They surveyed more than 160 girls and rounded up 34 others to participate in focus groups.

Survey results found that girls repeatedly had been called derogatory names. There had been requests for sex. The more severe forms of street harassment included guys touching girls’ thighs, faces, buttocks or breasts. Girls as young as 10 had been harassed. Boys as young as 10 had been the harassers. Girls said they felt afraid to walk past the boys and men. Many said they felt powerless.

The action team took pictures of gangways, alleys and businesses that they determined were hot spots for catcalling. They put together a report and presented it last winter to the community, the police and elected officials, including their alderman and Cook County and state politicians.

They requested better police patrols along Morse and better lighting in the area because some of the young women have to travel the streets at night.

The action team also created a workshop, which will begin in May, on how and when to confront the guys, since some are particularly aggressive and the girls worry about retribution.

One of the reasons I was moved by these young women, who are mostly African-American and Caribbean, was because when I heard about them, I had just read about a national study that said black girls from households earning below \$25,000 a year don’t get much respect. A sad consequence of the hip-hop culture has been to define black women and their sexuality in some pretty vile terms.

I mentioned the study to action team member Joyce Taylor as we took a short walk along Morse. I told her I was impressed that the young women are refusing to accept negative labels or harassment.

“It’s not normal,” said Joyce, 16. “You can’t control what [the men] say all the time. But you can control how you feel about yourself. And you can say, ‘You don’t have the right to touch me, and I will call the police.’”

The girls hope that adults hear them, because they don’t want the catcalling to escalate into rape. This is a battle they shouldn’t have to fight alone. They need better lighting. They need more police patrols.

Most of all, the guys need to be educated—as folks have been in the workplace and in schools—to understand that this behavior is disgusting. No woman should have to endure being demeaned and humiliated as she walks down the street.

That’s a message that must resonate to corners far beyond Morse Avenue.

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