

Girls unite to fight street harassment

Group targets leering, catcalling men in bid to gain some respect

BY CHERYL V. JACKSON
Staff Reporter

For 15-year-old Ronnett Lockett, there's no such thing as a leisurely stroll in her Rogers Park neighborhood. Coming home from school, from meetings, from stores, she always picks up the pace.

Lockett has to move quickly, she says, to maneuver past leering, catcalling men who hang out on the sidewalks she uses.

She's not alone. The hey babying and lewd language have grown into such a problem that Lockett and other girls in her neighborhood are banding together to raise awareness about street harassment.

The Young Women's Action team of 14- to 18-year-olds is distributing thousands of posters touting "R-E-S-P-E-C-T — Let Me Tell You What It Means To Me" to businesses and homes in an attempt to encourage people to stay away from congregating men so the girls can feel more comfortable

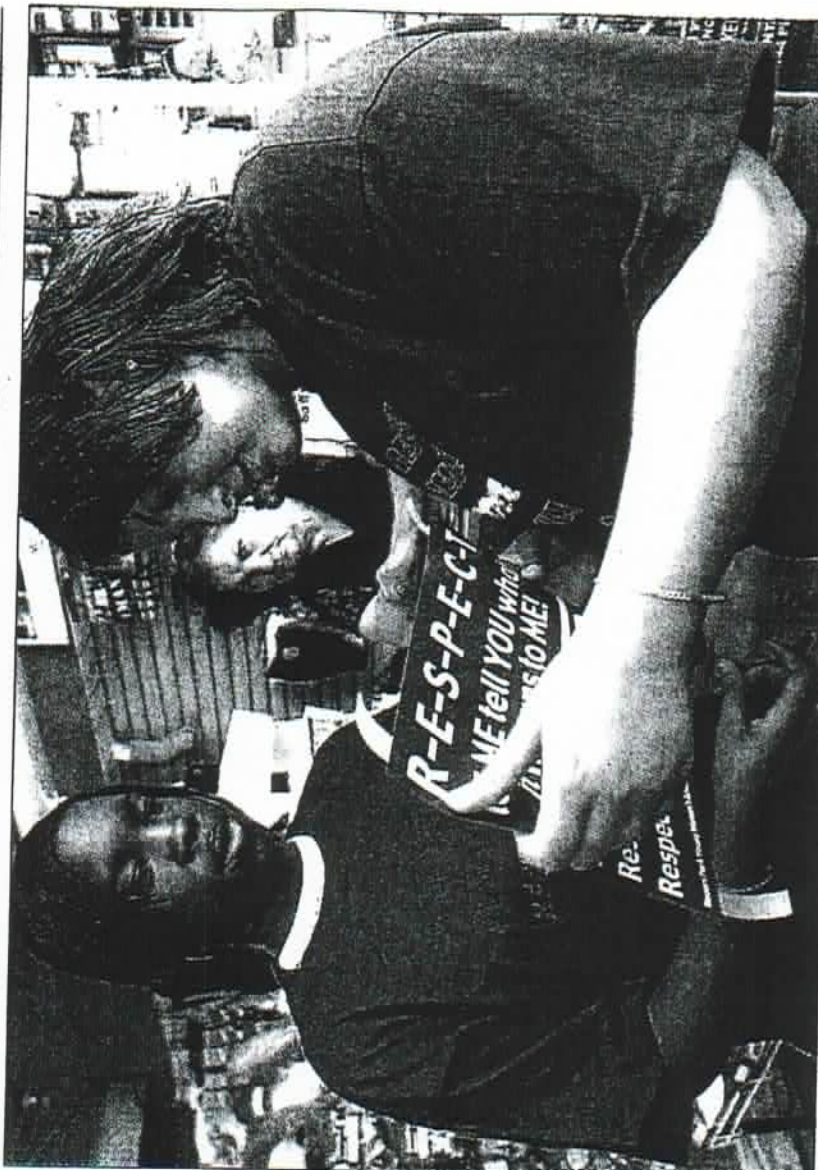
going about their daily lives. Last week, the group launched a neighborhood watch-style program aimed at reducing the number of harassing incidents they experience, including threats that frequently result when girls ignore men's unwanted advances.

Teens such as Lockett feel they can't walk freely in their community, she said. Not to the neighborhood restaurants. Not to the candy stores. No matter how conservative their dress. Not even during daylight hours, she said.

She and others in the 14-member group want adults to intervene and actively disapprove of the unwanted overtures, said Mariame Kaba, a manager at Friends of Battered Women and Their Children, which is sponsoring the action team.

"They said we need to have the adults in the community step up. It should not be up to 12-year-old girls to have to fight off often grown men," Kaba said, adding that the group hopes police will increase patrols during before- and after-school hours along Morse Avenue and Howard Street, from Lake Michigan to Ridge.

The campaign follows a 2003 survey by the group that revealed the practice to be a major concern of 10- to 19-year-old females. Girls



Jackquette Smith (left), 17, and Shannon Bittner, 16, prepare to put up a poster touting "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" in Helen Babayan's One Dollar Deals store on Morse Avenue in Rogers Park. —RICH HEIN/SUN-TIMES

reported men touching them to get their attention. Activists fear the actions can escalate into sexual assaults.

Some girls reported they often ran home to avoid being harassed. "A few girls fight back and resist," Kaba said. "But that's not safe, either."

Girls surveyed expressed anger, fear and anxiety, but many said they felt helpless to do anything

about the problem.

"I just keep walking. If you do say something, it may turn into a physical fight," Lockett said.

Five restaurants on Morse, a couple on Howard and a local candy store are all but cut off to Karia Campbell, 17, on some days because "there are so many boys in front of it that you just go to another place," she said.

The girls aim to educate both

males and females about the issue, she said, noting that some girls actually respond positively to the catcalls, which confuses some men about how to approach girls and women.

"Some don't even know that it's harassment," Campbell said. "They think it's just normal flirting."

For more information about the program, call (773) 274-5232.