

Young women's Action Team tackles violence and harassment issues in Rogers Park

By Jenna Naranjo (with Mariame Kaba)

Though Jonnae Taylor is only 15, the Rogers Park teen has already grown numb to street harassment—she has dealt with it daily since second or third grade. Taylor lives near Howard Street, where sexually explicit comments are frequently made by men who congregate outside storefronts and on street corners. Most women in the area know that walking on Howard means confronting catcalls like "Hey, sexy" and much worse. "It's part of our community," says 15-year-old Crystal Villanueva.

As part of the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team (YWAT), Villanueva, Taylor and their peers are working to combat this problem. Over the past 11 months, the team has researched street harassment, compiled a report and developed a workshop to help other girls cope with harassment.



Members of the Young Women's Action Team meet every Thursday at Rogers Park Community Council.

In 2002, Friends of Battered Women and Their Children (a Rogers Park domestic violence agency) teamed with Region 1 YouthNet (at the Rogers Park Community Council) and Howard Area Community Center to organize a teen forum during which many girls expressed concerns about rampant harassment on both Morse and Howard. In response, Friends of Battered Women secured a \$5,000 grant from the Girl's Best Friend Foundation to launch YWAT. Region 1 YouthNet, Mariame Kaba (Friends of Battered Women's prevention and education manager) recruited eight girls, who researched harassment 20 hours a week for six weeks last summer. "Many of the girls initially thought there was nothing they could do," says Kaba.

Newly formed YWAT developed a survey, collected responses from 168 girls, interviewed 34 girls through focus groups, and compiled their results in a report, "Hey Cutie, Can I Get Your Digits?", which was distributed to key community stakeholders.

The report revealed that catcalling leaves most victims feeling "afraid, uncomfortable and powerless."

Eighty-one percent of survey respondents also said they consider Howard and Morse to be the most unsafe streets in Rogers Park, 53 percent felt nothing can stop the problem, and 36 percent said harassment happens more than once a day.

Last December, group members presented their findings at Loyola University's Simpson Living-Learning Center (6333 N. Winthrop). The meeting was attended by more than 60 community members, including representatives of Ald. Joe Moore (49th ward), Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence, Chicago Department of Public Health, National Runaway Switchboard, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and other organizations.

Since completing the research, YWAT members have continued to meet every Thursday evening at Rogers Park Community Council (1530 W. Morse) to plan their

next steps. The group now totals about 14 participants aged 13 to 18. "We're fed up," says Shauniece Armstead, 15. "Not a day goes by that we don't get stopped." Adds 16-year-old Jackquette Smith: "When a grown man tries 'getting' with you, it's sick."

The group continues to work on harassment and violence issues in the community, and plans to hold workshops to help elementary-school students cope with street harassment. YWAT is also working with local officials to push for

continued on page 24

June 2004
Rogers Park News

Harassment

continued from page 2

safer streets. In April, the group met with Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin and State Representative Harry Osterman (14th District) to voice their concerns and discuss the possibility of launching a special campaign, "Respect for Women and Girls in Rogers Park". They also demanded better lighting and more police patrols on Morse and Howard.

Finally, YWAT is tackling the issue of teen dating violence, conducting research at Stephen F. Gale Community Academy, Roger C. Sullivan High School and St. Scholastica Academy, as well as five schools attended by YWAT members in other communities. As part of the effort, YWAT sponsored a poetry contest about teen dating vio-

lence and hosted a May 29 event celebrating the winners at Berger Park Cultural Center (6205 N. Sheridan). Youth ranging from 11 to 19 attended.

Kaba has high hopes that YWAT can help change the way girls and women deal with violence and harassment. As 15-year-old Emilyya Whitis puts it, "A lot of our friends are facing violence in their relationships. We are dealing with all the issues that affect girls in our communities and we want to do something!"

For more information about YWAT, contact Mariame Kaba at 773.274.5232 ext. 26.

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SUMMARY OF YWAT SURVEY FINDINGS

Total young women surveyed: 168

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age
22.6% between 10 and 13
36% between 14 and 16
25% between 17 and 19

Ethnicity
55% African-American/Black
22% Latina/Chicana/Hispanic
10% Asian-American
5.4% White/Caucasian

HARASSMENT

86% catcalled (Hey baby! Hey beautiful!) on the street
58% harassed by men or boys on street
36% harassed once a day or more
54% never responded to catcaller or harasser
53% felt helpless to stop harassment
60% felt unsafe walking in Rogers Park
61% of those who felt unsafe most uncomfortable at night (8pm to 12am)
81% deemed Howard or Morse as most unsafe streets in Rogers Park

SCHOOLS ATTENDED BY RESPONDENTS

Roger C. Sullivan High (41)	24%
Eugene Field Elementary (15)	9%
Nicholas Senn High (15)	9%
Stephen F. Gale Academy (14)	8%
Stephen T. Mather High (9)	5%
Albert G. Lane High (9)	5%
Jordan Community Academy (8)	5%
George B. Armstrong Elementary (5)	3%
Joyce Kilmer Elementary (5)	3%
TOTAL	71%