



Spoken Word performance by Jackquette Smith, 18-years-old, Jonnae Taylor, 16, Emilyya Whitis, 16. [Photo by Amaya Roberson]

men and boys their own age who loitered outside of stores or on corners.

Some of the girls decided to actively address the violation of their personal safety. Eight girls were recruited from the community and, thanks to a grant from the Girl's Best Friend Foundation, they spent their summer interviewing their peers about harassment. They called themselves the Young Women's Action Team, surveyed 168 neighborhood girls and interviewed 34 young women in focus groups. They then produced a report, "Hey Cutie, Can I Get Your Digits?" to answer the question: Do other young women experience the same disrespect?

by Amaya N. Roberson

Anti-Street Harassment

Workshop: How to Organize an Anti-Street Harassment Campaign in Your Community

Presented by the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team

These young women of the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team, ages 14 to 18, focused on creating a youth led activist force.

Since June 2003, the girls have met once a week to organize around harassment near Rogers Park in Chicago, Illinois. Their work began when Friends of Battered Women and their Children (a domestic violence agency) put on a teen forum. The girls who attended overwhelmingly spoke about how they felt threatened when walking down a main street in their neighborhood. They said they experienced verbal abuse and catcalls ("Hey baby" and "Smile for me"), and, worse yet, men touching them,



Members of the Young Women's Action Team: (not in order) Renee Braggs, Joyce Taylor, Shauniece Armstead, Ronnett Lockett, Shannon Bittner, Jackquette Smith, Emilyya Whitis, Geri Whitis and Jonnae Taylor. [Photo by Amaya Roberson]

grabbing their hair and clothing and sometimes even following them home all under the guise of trying to "holla" at or get with these very young girls. They were harassed on their way to school by both older

According to their findings:

- 86% said that they had been catcalled on the street.
- 58% said men or boys on the street had harassed them.

- 36% of those respondents who had been harassed suggested that this happened once a day or more.
- 54% said that they never responded to the catcaller or harasser.
- 53% felt like they could not do anything to stop street harassment.
- 60% felt unsafe walking around in Rogers Park.
- 61% of those who felt unsafe were most uncomfortable at night (8 p.m. to midnight).

The demographics of their survey participants were;

- 22.6% between the ages of 10 and 13
- 36% were between the ages of 14 to 16
- 25% were between the ages of 17 to 19

Their ethnicities were:

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

With this report in hand, the girls executed a wildly successful grassroots campaign to raise awareness about the harassment they faced on a daily basis. Their collective voice also demanded that adults step up to tackle this public menace. The girls in their words “stalked” local leaders, including police and elected officials, until they took notice.

The girls asked for and got more street lights on their main walk to school. They also brilliantly enlisted the help of local business owners—like the candy and convenience stores where harassers habitually congregated that the girls could not

even enter on a normal day. Recognizing their economic power, the girls let the shop owners know that their safety is good for business and many agreed to post signs in their windows reading:

R-E-S-P-E-C-T let me tell YOU what it means to ME! Respect my body. Respect my mind. Respect ME. STOP STREET HARASSMENT.

The girls also got impressive news coverage including articles in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun Times* as well as a spot on their local evening news. A lot of the buzz around this project resulted from the girls being so young and so well organized, a fact that shows the effectiveness of youth organizing. When a teenage girl tells a reporter she cannot walk to school without being sexually harassed by a man old enough to be her father, people take notice.

I was struck by the energy these young women possessed. They were articulate, well informed, creative and full of excitement during their presentation. There were about 10 girls running the workshop. They were accompanied by two adults who gave the girls plenty of room to shine. The girls effortlessly shared the spotlight with each other, proud of the work they had done and aware of their impact.

They had already organized workshops to educate both boys and girls about street harassment and had extended their campaign to teen dating violence. Impressively these girls sparked a continued dialogue in their community about violence against women.

At the workshop, they spoke confidently, one girl saying “harass-

ment is anything that makes *you* feel uncomfortable,” and another chiming in “men may not feel like they are attacking us—but we feel attacked.”

These girls also gave workshop participants tangible tools to facilitate their own campaigns. They brought their extensive report about street harassment of girls in Rogers Park, along with a campaign planning chart provided by Chicago’s own Pink Bloque (www.pinkbloque.org), a list of manuals, books and reports they found useful and a handout with a graphic explaining the “Escalation of Street Harassment” that they designed themselves. They distributed a flyer about what harassment looks and feels like and ways to stop a harasser. The girls also showed off the tee-shirts and signs they made that called for respect of women and girls.

Three of the girls, Jackquette Smith, Jonnae Taylor and Emilyya Whitis, even performed a spoken word piece about Little Red navigating through the Hood while dodging insults from the Big Bad Wolf.

These young women of color showed how powerful community activism can be when girls take the lead and how necessary it is for some of us older girls to take a step back. When we mentor youth and give them the room to take on leadership their confidence blooms, our movement grows and change happens. These girls put on the best workshop of the conference and inspired me to come home and work on a street harassment campaign in my community. That earns them a gold star for feminist rabble rousing—a key goal of any INCITE! gathering. ♦

For more information on INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, visit www.incite-national.org.