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Fighting harassment one community at a time

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Women can already share their experiences of street harassment on hollabackchicago.com, but one group wants to do something actively to end the violence.

Come May 4, many Chicagoans will be expressing their resistance to negative urban encounters in the second annual Day of Action Against Street Harassment, created by the Young Women's Action Team in Rogers Park.

"This is a decentralized way to express creative resistance techniques," said Mariame Kaba, the adult adviser to youth-led YWAT.

Last year there were over 140 personal actions taken by different members of the Chicago area, including passing out flyers, holding workshops, showing awareness films or just simply wearing the color orange.

"We chose orange because it is very loud. If a lot of people wear it, other people will ask questions," said Lillian Matanmi, co-coordinator of the Day of Action. "It's another way to raise awareness and address the issue."

Prior to last year's Day of Action, many of YWAT's efforts were focused in Rogers Park, including their Respect Campaign and working with elected officials to improve lighting and enforce loitering laws.

The group, however, wanted to do something that extended beyond their neighborhood.

"[We asked] how can we get the community to become an active part against street harassment? We wanted to take [the issue] citywide and get more people involved in interrupting [it]," said Kaba.

In a written statement from the Day of Action, YWAT members state that it "originated out of our desire to make sure that everyone hear and internalizes the message that 'the streets belong to ALL OF US.'" (original emphasis.)

The objectives of the day are: to raise public awareness, build support, demand "community accountability" for ridding the streets of harassment, and to document the actions taken against street harassment through a photographic exhibit and zine.

Many organizations and universities will be taking action. Last year, UIC students from the Campus Advocacy Network handed out pamphlets and buttons on campus.

"The action people take could be anything," said Daphne Rene, director of YWAT and co-coordinator of the Day of Action. "You could hold a workshop, participate in a march or just wear orange. We just want people to be able to talk about street violence."

The only difference between last year's Day of Action and this year's is that YWAT hopes more people

will get involved.

"It doesn't matter if it's any different as long as people are trying to stop violence. I feel like we should dedicate a day to just that...[even though] we should be working against it every day," said Matanmi.

YWAT is a "social change project" that addresses the issues affecting women under 21 years of age. The group was formed four years ago and is composed of high school and undergraduate college students who grew up in Rogers Park.

"This can have an impact on changing a young woman's perspective of her personal space. It is important to feel empowered in the space you live in and in your own body," said Kaba.

"Street harassment is an issue people can talk about," said Rene. "They shouldn't fear other people will stop or follow them. We're going to keep working [against street harassment] until it eventually stops."

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