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Take Back the Night at Saint Mary's College

By Sophie Braccini



Students march to 'take back the night;' on the left, Karen Mendonca and William Foley Photo Sophie Braccini

It's impossible to translate the emotion permeating the room at "Take Back The Night" at Saint Mary's College (SMC) on April 22nd; impossible to convey the intensity of the silence that enveloped the room as participants told their own stories of physical and sexual violence; impossible to transmit through words the electrifying feeling given by the survivors, as their strength and resilience was evoked through their stories. Historically, it is women who have had reason to fear walking alone at night and that is why "Take Back the Night" began some 30 years ago in Brussels, Belgium. The movement has spread all over the world; SMC and the Women's Crisis Center have been participating for years. This year, the Town of Moraga declared its solidarity with the campus on this issue and proclaimed the month of April, "Sexual Assault Awareness Month."

Most participants came with stories, but a few came with facts and statistics. When Lieutenant Jeff Price of the Moraga Police Department took the stage, he presented data about the town. "We investigated four cases of rape in 2009, and 11 cases of domestic violence," said Price, "our work usually starts at the hospital and the earlier the incident is reported the easier it is for us to investigate."

Cases are then transferred to the District Attorney who decides to prosecute, or not, depending on the evidence.

Jack Schmidt, of Community Violence Solutions, reminded the audience that 1 in 6 women has reported being raped, and that 85% of the time the victim knows the perpetrator.

Later in the night William Foley, SMC's Director of Public Safety, said this was the 23rd time he was participating in a "Take Back the Night" event. "This is a long night and it is an emotional night," said Foley. He confided that his participation in these events had made him look inside himself and decide to no longer stand still.

During the evening poems of joy were told as well as stories of unbelievable sadness. Young women shared aching memories, describing the guilt, the misery, and the pain; and noting that, even years later, the hurt does not go away. One young woman expressed in a poem how love had been replaced by obsession in an abusive relationship. Young men spoke, too, about their solidarity with the women or their lives, "I am an ally," said William Calderon. The men were bold enough to share their own vulnerability and affirm their desire for change. "There is suffering right here in our school," said Robert Rivera, "and sometimes I want to cry, but my socialization prevents me. I dream of social equality." E.J. Youngblood played a piece he had created for his sister.

Karen Mendonca, Moraga's Vice-Mayor, was invited to participate and she shared her pride in being part of the event. "The 'Take Back the Night' event at SMC was an incredibly powerful and moving experience," said Mendonca, "Through the sharing of profoundly personal stories, poems, readings, dances, songs, and original music, women and men expressed their solemn commitment to the ending of sexual assault and violence."

The evening ended joyfully as students stepped into the night carrying lights and posters, calling for an end to violence.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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