

Violence against women on rise: march organizer



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KITCHENER

After 25 years of marches like these, you'd think Waterloo Region might have become a safer place for women.

Better think again.

An organizer of the annual Take Back the Night March, which took over two lanes of King Street last night, says local women are still being assaulted in disturbingly large numbers.

For about an hour, a few hundred women hoisted placards and chanted, reminding passersby that 25 years after the first such march here, there's still work to be done.

They rallied in Brewmeister Green, at King and William streets, then set off for a noisy and symbolic march down King to Kitchener City Hall. They asked men not join in, but to show their support by cheering from the sidelines.

"I think there's an attitude that violence and sexual assault against women isn't as much of an issue as it used to be," said Sara Casselman of the Kitchener-Waterloo Sexual Assault Support Centre, which organized the event.

"Often there's an attitude that the women's movement came, did its work, and now it's done."

Casselman should know; her agency deals with the victims of sex assault every day. The sexual assault centre responds to an average of 104 crisis calls from women every month, she said.

Every week, 32 women receive individual counselling at the centre, plus another 20 are in group sessions, trying to recover from the hidden scars of sexual assault.

There were 515 sexual assaults reported to local police in 2006, the vast majority of them against women. Casselman's group believes that figure only hints at the problem, and argues barely 10 per cent of incidents are ever brought to the attention of the authorities.

"It's been 25 years and the problem hasn't changed," she said.

"Each year, the number continues to rise, and the problem continues to be pervasive."

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Sex-trade workers get crisis line

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KITCHENER

In cities across Canada, they went missing seemingly without a sound.

Until their bodies were discovered--near rivers, in ditches and unearthed on an isolated pig farm-- few knew their names. Few went looking for them.

Most sex trade workers have their share of horror stories to tell of "bad dates" who threatened their safety or worse.

One woman, a 27-year-old who has been working in downtown Kitchener for nearly a decade, wiped tears from her eyes yesterday as she recalled being dragged into the bushes by a teenager less than a month ago.

"I've been raped twice. I've had a knife to my throat four times --all in five years," she said.

She didn't report those incidents-- in part because she thought no one would care and in part because she didn't want to bring any more trouble upon herself.

It's exactly the type of gap Waterloo Regional Police say they're trying to bridge with a new tip line, aimed specifically at women, men and transgendered persons involved in the sex trade.

The line, dubbed Project Guardian, is toll free from anywhere in Waterloo Region. Callers can leave their name or remain anonymous.

It will be monitored and followed up by members of the major case unit.

It's being launched as a proactive measure, police said, but one all the more important in light of an investigation of a Kitchener man who carried out a series of sadistic tortures in the drug underworld.

The accused in that case has since pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing.

"It really revealed a number of allegations that went undetected and unreported to police," said Insp. Bryan Larkin.

"We recognize, for a variety of reasons, people in the sex trade may not come forward, but are the victims of criminal incidents and are at risk . . . This is really about reaching out and providing police services for all people."

The 27-year-old woman agreed that for those in the sex trade, turning to the police for help is not always an easy option. She is not being named because The Record does not identify victims of sexual assault.

Trust is a big issue, she said, and if the officers with whom she has built relationships aren't working, she probably won't report it.

The new line will at least make it easier to tell someone, she said, flicking a card emblazoned with the new phone number between her fingers. Police will hand out the cards on the streets as well as give them to the appropriate agencies, Larkin said.

So-called "bad date lines" have been set up in several cities, but they're often a reactive measure, said Sara Casselman of the Kitchener-Waterloo Sexual Assault Support Centre.

"Too often, there are incidents where there's a number of sex workers that go missing or experience violence and often front line workers know about it, but there hasn't been a mechanism for reporting," she said.

"After the silence happens, then communities set up these lines . . . What our community is doing is being proactive and saying, 'We're not going to tolerate violence against anyone.'"

The 27-year-old woman said she only works at night now-- she's bothered by how people look at her in the day.

She's careful, she said. She won't go with anyone who gives her a "bad vibe." But she still walks with memories and ghosts of those who didn't make it. Her friend, 38-year-old Tina Yule, was found dead on the bank of the Nith River in April. She believes Yule was murdered.

"Tina would do anything for anybody," she said. "She would never fight with anybody. She would have done whatever they told her. They had no reason to kill her."

Yule's death is still under investigation. Police haven't determined it to be a homicide, but it is considered suspicious.

The 27-year-old said she's not certain the "hard core" girls will use the line or use it appropriately. But, she's still hopeful that it could prevent some future violence.

Casselman said it could take some time for the line to build up credibility among those in the sex trade. But, she said, just making it available is a step forward.

"What it will do is give them an option so they don't feel silenced."

The Project Guardian tip line number is 519-650-8558.

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