

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ON SEXUAL ASSAULT

DURING THE 2018 FALL SEMESTER, AFTER NUMEROUS REPORTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULTS ON OHIO UNIVERSITY'S CAMPUS BROKE, THE OHIO COMMUNITY BANDED TOGETHER TO STAND UP FOR SURVIVORS AND BRING AWARENESS TO PROBLEMS HAPPENING ON CAMPUS. NOW, AS FALL SEMESTER IS IN FULL SWING, OHIO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN CHANGING THE CONVERSATION SURROUNDING SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS.

BY BAILEY FINK PHOTOS BY PROVIDED





One in five women

are **sexually assaulted** while attending a university and up to 80 percent of the time the victim is well-acquainted with the attacker.

Since the beginning of the semester, there have been three reported sexual assaults as of Oct. 16; one was reported to the Ohio University Police Department and two to the Athens Police Department, but Ohio University is making the news for a different reason: banners.

During Welcome Week, a photo posted on Twitter by Bobcat Barstool featuring six students in front of their house with a large bed sheet that read, "you taught them to walk we'll teach them to ride" went viral. Following this tweet, the popular account SheRatesDogs, known for calling out men on their inappropriate behavior, quoted the tweet and added "..... anyway ladies, tasers are \$10 on Amazon Prime," which quickly brought in over 14,000 retweets and 106,000 likes.

Throughout the week, more tweets featuring photos of inappropriate banners continued to get attention. One read, "Girls, my mint pod won't be the only thing in your mouth" and another said, "Your son might want to come & stay but we're gonna make him cum & leave."

As these banners were gaining negative attention, different banners hung by the sororities on campus were gaining attention for their positive messages regarding standing with survivors. These banners said things like: "We have the right to be heard #WPABelievesSurvivors," "Ask her what she's asking for #ADPBelievesSurvivors," and "You taught them to be fearful we'll teach them they deserve better. #SigKapStandsWithSurvivors."

In 2018, Sigma Kappa was the first sorority to hang a banner in

support of survivors outside of their house after 20 reports of sexual assault occurred within the first month of school. After a few days, 17 other sororities and fraternities hung banners to show that the Ohio University Greek Life community would not stand for these assaults.

As more banners were being hung, the Ohio University Greek Life community began making national news for their support of sexual assault survivors and the movement they were creating, including a USA TODAY article featuring OHIO students. Following the national attention, two Utah State University fraternities hung banners promoting sexual assault awareness and cited an Ohio University Interfraternal Council (IFC) tweet for the motivation behind hanging them, according

to the Utah Statesman.

"We're not talking about it to get attention or to praise ourselves, but I think [the attention] helped show that like 'look we're having these issues, but we're trying to do something about it,'" says Mary Pittro, president of the Women's Panhellenic Association (WPA).

This year during sorority spirit week, the week before the semester begins in which sorority women return to prepare for formal recruitment, WPA asked the sororities to make new banners to hang during welcome week to show that Ohio University sorority women stand with survivors.

"I hope [the banners] made a difference for the women who went through recruitment and I hope that they felt more empowered going through



*“WE STAND ALONGSIDE
SURVIVORS OF EVERY RACE,
ETHNICITY, GENDER AND SEXUAL
ORIENTATION. WE BELIEVE YOU
AND WE SUPPORT YOU.”*

— RAEANN ENSWORTH



recruitment,” says Raeann Ensworth, WPA’s vice president of public relations.

Following the arrival of the “WPA Believes Survivors” banners, Ohio Panhellenic tweeted their explanation for these banners. “The beginning of the school year usually mean[s] it’s time for Panhellenic Recruitment, but it’s also the ‘red zone’ — a period of time that is the most dangerous for campus sexual assault. WPA believes in a strong sisterhood that looks out for each other: all the time, every day. We stand alongside survivors of every race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. We believe you and we support you — we are your sisters.”

All of the Welcome Week banners went up during the “red zone,” which, according to NBC News, is the time from the first week of school until Thanksgiving break where sexual assault reports increase.

“You saw the horrific banners that went up on Welcome Weekend, but I think at the same time you also saw people directly responding either [on] social media or straight up in-person just saying like ‘look I’m not okay with this, I’m not going to interact with people that do that,’” says Ensworth.

Not only is the Ohio University community taking a stand against sexual assault, but also college communities across the country. It’s On Us, a national organization

originally founded in 2014 as an initiative of the Obama-Biden White House to stand up for sexual assault survivors and now with 250 campus chapters, hosted their first national student leadership summit to combat sexual assault at Ohio University from Aug. 2-5, 2019. The summit provided students, faculty and other attendees with an intensive weekend of training, workshops, keynotes and an opportunity to connect and share ideas with one another.

“I was assaulted on this campus and so I felt like getting the opportunity to come and to learn more about what had happened to me and what happens to so many other people on the place where it happened I’m, I guess, the kind of weirdo that would find that extremely healing,” Ensworth, who attended the summit, says.

Attendees were required to attend three workshops on sexual assault awareness/consent education, bystander intervention and survivor support. Additionally, they were able to choose three more workshops focused on tools in public policy and legislative action, campus organizing and changing the culture on campus.

“Specifically, why I think it’s important it happened [in Athens] is because I think it’s in a way a response to a lot of the things that happened last year on our campus, especially during the fall

semester, with the high amount of sexual assaults," Ensworth says.

Ensworth said the summit was important because she was sexually assaulted by a friend and won her case in court, so it was a good place for her to learn more about the other cases of sexual assault that can happen and the outcomes of those. She also explained that as a vice president on WPA she felt a responsibility to learn about the things that happen to WPA members and to become educated on how to be the best ally possible.

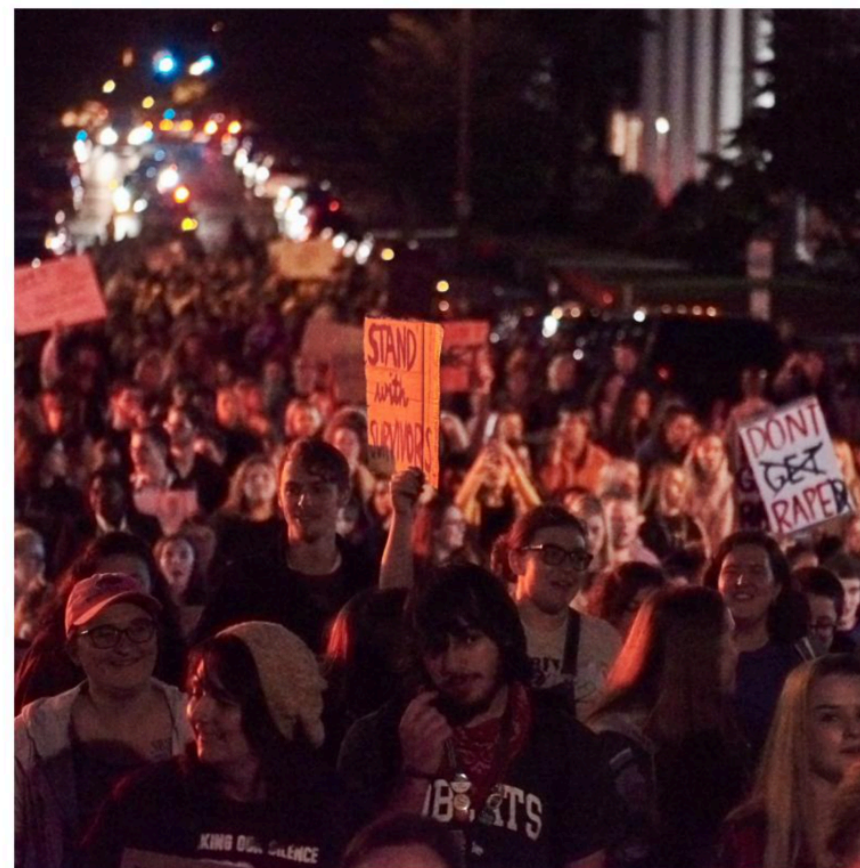
"When you start having the conversation about what sexual assault is before the students even get here then you're probably primed to have that conversation once they are here," she says.

It's On Us is not new to Ohio University, in September 2018, in response to the increasing number of sexual assaults on campus, three students, now alumni, organized the It's On Us, Bobcats march. Organizers Cody Shanklin, then-WPA president Mallory Golski, and Hannah Burke brought nearly 500 supporters to College Green where students shared their experiences with sexual assault.

Additionally, for the past three years, the Women's Center, in partnership with other offices and organizations, has sponsored an art exhibit to bring awareness and show support for the victims of sexual assault. This year the

"Through the Survivors' Lens" exhibit provided 52 photographs from 20 sexual assault survivors that tell their stories. Some of the photographs reflected stories of childhood trauma, sexual violence in college, and domestic violence in long-term marital relationships. The exhibit was displayed in the Trisolini Gallery from Aug. 26 to Sept. 14, where last year's exhibit "What Were You Wearing?" was also displayed, which was an exhibit showing what victims' were wearing at the time of their assault to change the narrative and show that what they were wearing never mattered. In 2017, the Monument Quilt came to Ohio University and was displayed at Peden Stadium, the quilt provided a promise and a reminder for survivors that they are never alone.

OHIO students aren't the only ones taking action, Ohio University has taken new preventative steps to promote sexual assault awareness on campus. At the beginning of fall semester, students may have noticed new, brightly colored banners on light posts around campus publicizing resources and how to be a better bystander, also OUPD purchased thousands of coffee sleeves around Athens that said "We need your help to stop sexual assault." Additionally, on Aug. 19, Ohio University launched a new app called Bobcat Safe that allows students to share their location and



virtually walk home with friends and also get in contact with the police easily, if needed.

"My goal for this campus would be that ... rapists are uncomfortable in every venue they go into. I just don't want them to feel comfortable in a bar, I don't want them to feel comfortable at a house party, I don't want them to feel comfortable with the way that they are," says Ensworth. "I think that is starting to change because we don't find your jokes

funny, we don't find your banners funny, it's over ... and we're not going to put up with it anymore." Ensworth believes as the conversation continues to change and women realize the power they have, the culture can begin to change as well. Even as the "red zone" is coming to an end, it is important that the conversation surrounding sexual assault does not stop here. If we continue to talk about it and become better bystanders, maybe one day the texts from OUPD will never come again.