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Sexual abuse victims empower themselves through stories

By Christopher Placek

As a freshman in college, happy to be away from home, Shannon trusted everyone around her.

Why?

"Because I had no reason not to," she said.

But she now admits she failed to see the red flags.

One night she went back to a guy's room — someone she only knew for about a month. He locked the door. Then turned up the music.

"He overpowered me and there's nothing I could do about it."

For a long time she kept her story of sexual abuse a secret, but now Shannon, a self-defense instructor, is telling women her story — and how to fight back.

"I was put in a corner. Now I'm doing whatever I can to help anybody else from being put in that corner."

Her story was just one testimonial given during a Take Back the Night rally and candlelight vigil at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines Friday night. Similar events have been held around the world since the mid-1970s to bring awareness to issues of sexual abuse and other violence.

Krissie Harris, Oakton's coordinator of student life, decided to have the rally after taking a sexual assault crisis intervention class at the school last year.

"I thought I knew everything but I didn't. Maybe the community doesn't either," Harris said. "It's about breaking the silence."

The rally was the culmination of the school's first Sexual Assault Awareness Week. Other events in the week included the "Clothesline Project" display of T-shirts with messages and illustrations made by sexual abuse victims and their loved ones. Also, life-size red and black wooden cutouts of victims were scattered throughout campus, with their stories attached to placards.

Jim Huenink, executive director of the Northwest Center Against Sexual Assault in Arlington Heights, has counseled victims of sexual abuse since 1975. He noted such statistics as: 1 out of 4 females are the victims of sexual abuse before age 18, and 18 percent of adult women report being victim to rape or attempted rape.

"When you see numbers like that, it's an epidemic," Huenink said.

Sandy, a former client of Northwest CASA, told of the two times she was sexually assaulted — her freshman year of college, and after a third date with a man 12 years ago.

"I am a survivor and I no longer let it define me. Suppressing these memories will not make them go away," she said. "Get help if you need it. Don't give up."