

WOMEN'S ENEWS

February 15, 2004

Texas Ads Show the Real Face of Rape

A public-awareness campaign against sexual violence in Texas features victims. "Speak Up. Speak Out." is serving as a national model for combating sexual assault and encouraging victims to seek help.

By Susan Palmquist, WeNews Correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – An assailant kicked in the door of Bridget Kelly's apartment in Killeen, Texas, stuck a gun in her chest and ordered her to drive to an ATM to withdraw money. He then drove her to a field where at gunpoint he raped her, shot her three times in her back and left her for dead. Despite losing blood and strength, Kelly managed to stagger to a house where the owner called for an ambulance.

Kelly's assailant was caught the same night of the attack and convicted ten weeks later of aggravated sexual assault, attempted murder, kidnapping and robbery on Aug. 30, 2002. Six months after the conviction, in February 2003, Kelly was telling her story again. But it wasn't to a jury. It was to the Texas public at large, in a series of state-wide TV and radio ads.

In effort to increase public awareness about sexual assault, Kelly took part with five other women in "Speak Up. Speak Out.", produced by the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, a nonprofit educational and advocacy organization based in Austin. It is the first rape-awareness campaign in Texas to feature real victims and has been so successful in encouraging sex-assault survivors to speak out and seek help that it is now being replicated across the country. According to 1999 data of the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 82 percent of rapes going unreported nationwide.

Encouraging Victims to Reach Out

"With personal stories of courage from brave survivors of sexual assault, TAASA's campaign is not only leading more people than ever to reach out to the hotline, but also ensuring they don't suffer in silence," said Scott Berkowitz, president and founder of the Washington-based Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, the nation's largest anti-sexual-assault organization, which operates a national hotline. "In the last year calls to the national sexual hotline have increased by two and half times in Texas and 23 percent nationwide. TAASA's work has been critical to this success."

The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, which works to prevent sexual assault and fights to ensure rapists are brought to justice, is now using “Speak Up. Speak Out.” as a model for a national campaign. The Texas Association Against Sexual Assault has also been asked to speak about the campaign at a congressional briefing in April conducted by the National Center for Victims of Crime, the nation’s leading resource and advocacy organization for crime victims based in Washington, D.C. Last April, the association also made a presentation about the campaign to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Annette Burrhus-Clay, executive director of the Texas association, says several states, including New Mexico, Oklahoma, Virginia and Washington, have shown interest in using the campaign, either with their own state hotline or the national hotline as contact information. While other states have shown interest in replicating the campaign, tight state budgets are holding them back. The College Network, now called mtvU, a college TV network owned by MTV and Viacom that plays in college dorms across the country, has also expressed interest in using the campaign.

Victims from All Ethnic Groups

“The campaign has shown that survivors come in all shapes, sizes, colors and from all ethnic groups,” Burrhus-Clay said. Other women in the campaign include Eunice Ruiz, Lisa Federer, Cathy Ransom and Gina Cotroneo. Each of their faces flashes on the Texas association’s Web site and each of their stories can be read by clicking on each of their names.

“I hope the campaign will also change the way the media covers rape stories and that the subject will no longer be taboo,” said Kelly. She was also featured in Glamour magazine, and made an appearance on ABC’s “Good Morning America” as part of the campaign.

“Speak Up. Speak Out.” is funded by a grant from the office of the attorney general in Texas, a state that, according to 2002 FBI statistics, ranks second – after California – in the number of reported rapes. The generous size of the grant – \$2 million for two years – enabled the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault to run a paid advertising campaign in April and August of 2003 featuring radio, TV, and print ads in both English and Spanish. The campaign continues to produce posters and brochures.

The campaigns feature six women telling their own stories of being attacked and what happened to them afterward.

Experiences That Others Recognize

“Three of the women were raped by complete strangers,” said Burrhus-Clay. “One is a survivor of incest, one was sexually assaulted by a man she knew and one by her boyfriend. I think their experiences reach many women who have faced similar situations.”

Kelly, attacked almost two years ago, came to the attention of the Texas association after advocates there read about her ordeal in a newspaper. “My father’s a columnist with the Omaha World-Herald and he wrote an extensive account of the rape and shooting for The Dallas Morning News,” said Kelly, a first-grade teacher in Killeen, a small city in central Texas.

Kelly wanted to take part in the campaign to help fight the sense of social stigma that casts silence over the topic of rape. “There is no way anyone is going to make me feel ashamed of having been raped,” Kelly said. “I’m so grateful for the opportunity to participate in TAASA’s public awareness campaign.”

Her TV spot, which shows her standing in the field where she was raped and shot, was especially powerful. “We started to get calls from other survivors about 20 minutes after the segment’s airing,” said Burrhus-Clay.

Reaching out to College Students

After the start of the campaign, calls to the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault’s hotline doubled in volume during March and April 2003. The group’s Web site traffic has jumped threefold. As a result of expanded funding from the Texas Office of the Attorney General, the campaign was also able to reach about 2,000 college students. Several rape crisis centers around the state have reported that survivors have come forward to seek help citing “Speak Up. Speak Out.” as their reason for doing so.

As well as radio, TV, and print advertising, the campaign has also included a tour of college campuses throughout Texas with survivors sharing their stories with students.

Maggie Watson, a sophomore at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos was raped while on vacation in Padre Island this past year. Watson didn’t tell anyone, but after returning to school she confided in a professor, who had herself been date-raped. The professor encouraged her to seek counseling and Watson began working with Linda Hunter, a counselor at Hays-Caldwell Women’s Center in San Marcos. It was Hunter, who knew about the campaign, who encouraged Watson to participate in the campaign’s campus tours.

“I enjoyed speaking at the colleges, it gave me an opportunity to share my story with other people and to reach them directly,” Watson said. “I had several people approach me and tell me they had friends who had been through the same experience.”

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For more information:

Texas Association Against Sexual Assault – Advocates, Survivors “Speak Up. Speak Out.” for Increased Awareness: http://www.taasa.org/latest_news/release02242003.php

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network: <http://www.rainn.org/>

National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center: <http://www.vawprevention.org/>

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