

Prevention is possible

April marks Sexual Assault Awareness Month

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Prevention is possible.

That's the theme for Sexual Assault Awareness Month, which launched in Antigonish at Town Hall council chambers April 1.

Along with a proclamation signing by Mayor Carl Chisholm, Municipality of the County of

Antigonish Councillor Donnie MacDonald and St. F.X.'s interim head of student services Bob Hale, those gathered heard from speakers who work in programs and services focussed on prevention.

"We are all impacted by sexual violence," Heather Blackburn, Antigonish Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program co-ordinator

and youth violence prevention educator, said in her opening remarks.

She stressed that sexual assault and sexual abuse is "not inevitable."

"It is preventable," Blackburn said, echoing the theme for the 2016 awareness month.

As for prevention, she added it is "not [about] giving women

whistles or safe ride programs or self defense classes; it is not monitoring and controlling the behaviours and wardrobes of women."

"Real violence prevention starts with the education of people, communities, key stakeholders and groups; to increase awareness, to better understand

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and to change attitudes and beliefs that support the constant influence of the rape culture, and to encourage and empower citizens to speak up, and intervene, when witnessing any form of sexual violence," Blackburn said.

She noted sexual violence prevention "seeks to create a consent culture."

"Where individuals, children and youth are taught to get and give consent for sexual activity; where personal values are encouraged and respected," Blackburn said.

"The cultural shift will not come easy; it will require strength, it will require determination and it will require courage."

Pervasive and normalized

Blackburn talked about "an entire spectrum of unwanted sexual behaviours and actions" that doesn't get their proper attention.

"Many of these behaviours have become so pervasive and normalized in our culture that they have become invisible, making it easier for perpetrators of sexual assault and abuse to go unnoticed; escaping accountability and free to continue perpetrating violence, while their victims suffer in silence," she said.

Blackburn added "we have all heard the statistics," before noting one in four Canadian women will experience sexual violence before graduating university; one in six Canadian men and boys will experience sexual assault or sexual abuse in their lifetime.

She added 82 per cent of victims of sexual assault are women, while 97 per cent of perpetrators are men.

"More than 40,000 sexual assaults occur in Canada each year, with the federal Department of Justice estimating that the cumulative cost of sexual assault reaching and surpassing \$1.8 billion annually," Blackburn said.

She added sexual abuse and assault survivors are three times more likely to have depression; six times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder; 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol; 23 times more likely to abuse drugs and misuse substances and four times more likely to contemplate suicide.

Amazing work

"We wanted to highlight some of the amazing sexual violence prevention work happening in our communities," Blackburn said, before introducing the first speaker.

When she took her turn at the podium, Betsy MacDonald, Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) provincial program coordinator, talked about the prevention initiative, which was launched 10 years ago by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre-Sexual Assault Services Association (AWRC-SASA), in co-operation with the Strait Regional School Board.

The program, which operates in all high schools in the Strait region, has expanded across the province - from Sydney to Shelburne - and points in between.

"There's been a lot of interest, especially in the past three years," MacDonald said of the program, which trains Grade 11 and 12 students in peer facilitation and some of the issues touched on in HRY.

"It is preventing violence by teaching the skills and the knowledge needed to have healthy relationships," she said.

MacDonald added peer facilitators gain knowledge in areas such as diversity, boundaries, communication, gender and sexuality, stereotypes, pop culture, social media and power and violence - "how that works in relationships."

With that training, they go to Grade 9 classrooms, where they lead 12 sessions.

"But, using a curriculum that we developed with youth over the years," MacDonald said.

She added the leaders "facilitate conversations and activities" with their younger peers.

As for the "effect" of the program, MacDonald said she would argue that it - and others like it - "are actually helping to change the culture that we live in."

She noted youth are facing issues like dating violence, hypersexualisation and cyber-violence more than ever.

"So, being able to have conversations about these issues, in a really frank and non-judgemental



Town of Antigonish Mayor Carl Chisholm (signing), along with Municipality of the County of Antigonish Councillor Donnie MacDonald (back, left) and St. F.X. interim head of student services Bob Hale, sign a proclamation recognizing April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The launch took place April 1 at Town Hall council chambers.

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way — where youth are actually listened to — is incredibly powerful, because they come to their own understanding.

"Being taught by their peers, which also helps with the, sort of, receptiveness and also just being willing to really engage," MacDonald added.

As for what they are hearing from Grade 9 students who complete the program, MacDonald said "they are certainly more aware of dating violence."

"And, they can name violence, whereas before, because it is so normalized in culture, sometimes it doesn't even get named; people see it as normal," she said.

"They are better [equipped] to

help a friend or somebody that they know who is in a violent or unhealthy situation. They are more aware of diversity — more embracing of diversity; more respectful of one another."

She noted sometimes they have Grade 9 boys who say 'they respect girls more, or it is not OK to violent to girls.'

"If there is one message that we want boys to come away with, isn't that the one," MacDonald offered.

From many schools, she said there is often feedback about "change in the culture and whole tone."

"We hear from teachers that there just tends to be a higher

level of respect in schools, where this kind of programming is happening," MacDonald said.

She added "we do know anecdotally that it is happening," when it comes to lessening violence.

"And, with the youth facilitators, we are sending leaders out into the world who now see themselves as role models on these issues, and they themselves are

transformed in the process of being peer facilitators," MacDonald noted.

Culture of consent

As for prevention work, such as the HRY program, she described it as "really, really crucial in building that culture of consent."

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"Because, first of all, we need to talk about it; we need to name it and we need to figure out a way to change it.

"Even just — I was in a class recently, where we were talking about [it]; we know what consent is — we know that only an enthusiastic 'yes' is consent and we know that a person must seek consent, but how do you actually do that? What does that actually look like?" she added.

As they went around the room, MacDonald recalled participants offering suggestions, ways that they would actually ask somebody for consent, "that doesn't seem sort of stiff and awkward."

"Because, it actually has to be practiced, in order to build a culture, and because sex is often something that happens in intimate settings, we need to talk about it to build a culture," she said.

"We certainly have a culture of talking about sex now that is infused with all of these problematic assumptions and attitudes."

MacDonald said she "found it to be a real privilege to do this work."

"I really want to see it continue and grow and get the support it needs, because youth are the ones that are going to go out and change the culture."

"They are doing it already," she added.

Get on board

Those youth changing the culture are part of a team that is needed to prevent sexual assault.

"I know that we can make a change and a difference, as long as we all get on board and go," Cst. Deepak Prasad of the Antigonish RCMP said.

"The train is going forward; we have to hop on board. There's no room for dilly-dallying, in my mind."

As part of the whole goal of "making the community safer,"

Prasad talked about one thing often that can be forgotten — the rights of the victim, which he pointed out are also covered in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms

"You have the right to safety, security and liberty, which means that you and I can walk down the street and not have to be worried about being harassed by the state or being a victim of a criminal offense," he said.

"If you are a victim of a criminal offense, the state has an obligation — by virtue of the police — to rectify that; to prevent or correct it."

Prasad added "we are always here to help, we are always here to believe; you always will be believed."

"We have to work as a team,

work as a partnership and do our best for victims of assault," he added.

Prasad said "together we can make a difference; together we are stronger."

"Together we can eliminate and prevent sexual violence," he added.

Delivering the message

During April, AWRC-SASA representatives will be leading events aimed at increasing awareness of

sexual violence and the ways in which people can get involved in its prevention.

Workers will be doing presentations for high school students, as well as adults working with survivors of sexual violence.

For more information about Sexual Assault Awareness Month, including help available for those who have suffered from sexual violence, visit the AWRC-SASA at Kirk Place in downtown Antigonish or call 902-863-6221.