

I Ask, the theme for Sexual Assault Awareness Month

Proclamation
signing event
April 9
at library

RICHARD MACKENZIE

✉ richardmac@thecasket.ca
🐦 @casket_news

An April 9 event at the People's Place Library, highlighted by a proclamation reading and signing, recognized the importance of April being designated Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

The morning-time event in the library's community room was emceed by Heather Blackburn — sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) co-ordinator from the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association (AWRC-SASA), and Avery Carter — sexual violence prevention and support with Family Services of Eastern Nova Scotia.

Both women talked about the significance of having a dedicated awareness month regarding sexual violence.

"Sexual assault is a societal issue, it impacts all of us in society yet, in many communities, you never hear about it; it's hard to talk about it, hard to disclose, not every community has the same level of access to supports," Blackburn said.

"So it's important we bring together our local community leaders to highlight what we're doing really well, but also to remind them of their ongoing commitment to raising awareness of sexualized violence so we can be better prepared to support victims of sexualized violence, throughout Antigonish town and county."

Carter noted there is also the "prevention" component and talked about the theme of this year's month — "I Ask."

"What the 'I Ask' theme means is, for example, in the past consent messaging has always been 'no means no and yes means yes' but with 'I Ask,' it's taking it one step further," Carter said. "There is a component of listening as well to the question and, more than listening, honouring what the individual has said in their response."

Blackburn said a goal is to highlight that consent for sexual activity "is a learned and modeled behavior."

"So if you were brought up in a household where no one thought to ask if you wanted a hug or a kiss good night, you may not have that awareness that you have autonomy over your own body,"



The community room at the People's Place Library was the site of a Sexual Assault Awareness Month event April 9. RICHARD MACKENZIE

she said.

"So we want to start that messaging really young. We want to frame and change the way we think about our normal interactions, or what has been normalized, so that we can make more visible when someone violates those normal behaviours. We're not saying that everyone is, po-

tentially, a sexual assailant, but what we do recognize is that we do live in a culture that normalizes and makes invisible those lesser forms of violence ... it changes what is visible, what we're aware of.

"In the long-game, making that cultural shift; shifting that community culture to one that asks

for consent in all interactions ... making more clear consent for sexual activity."

Blackburn said the AWRC-SASA has been recognizing April as Sexual Assault Awareness month since 2010.

"It started with a very tiny campaign with the mayor and town council, if they were avail-

able, just, kind-of, our in-house campaign," she said.

"But, as more-and-more people started doing this work, are more aware of sexualized violence, we've been able to grow it to involve more of Antigonish town and county, and the specialized communities within our community, to acknowledge that things aren't the same everywhere, across all things.

"Also, wanting to highlight the important work which is happening in those individual communities as well," she said, about the opportunities during the month.

Amongst those opportunities was a conference at the Port Hawkesbury Civic Centre April 12, as well as different workshops in the Strait area during the month.

Carter made special mention of a partnership with We'koqma'q First Nation Health Centre featuring a free barbecue and 'Red Dress' display, as well as a concert at Piper's Pub April 26, with the popular group Working Class Band. Proceeds from the concert will go towards Strait area sexual assault awareness and prevention programs and services.



Sexual Assault
Awareness Month



I ASK

Consent education has the power to fundamentally shift the way people think about all relationships. It cultivates respect for others and personal autonomy. It is also the cornerstone of many sexual violence prevention initiatives.

Educators and student support staff in the Strait Regional Centre for Education are receiving training in educating students about sexual consent. Health and relationships programming will soon provide students in grades 7 through 12 with specific content that complements existing programs.

Staff of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre & Sexual Assault Services Association who have specialized knowledge and skills in sex and relationship education have worked with education and health professionals in the school system to develop this programming.

If you would like to know more about consent education in schools please contact the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre & Sexual Assault Services Association

www.awrcsasa.ca

902-863-6221

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