Life

Students Promote *Healing and Wellness* in Take Back the Night

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"Breaking the current, letting the healing ripple." That was the theme for this year's Take Back the Night, a Sexual Assault Awareness Month event that the Women's Center hosted on April 14. T`vhe event took place at the Student Union Ballroom, which was adorned by tables comprised of turquoise table covers and white water lilies.

Each table had a different activity for students, representatives and guest speakers to enjoy with their peers. Each table had a different activity for students, representatives and guest speakers to enjoy with their peers. Students were set up with coloring supplies, rock painting, slime and more, all for attendants to enjoy.

Besides being able to explore different activities, attendees had an opportunity to connect with three resources that came to the event: the Women's Center, United Services and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center of Eastern Connecticut.

A few major components of Take Back the Night were the speeches given by three guest speakers, who provided unique insights about sexual violence and how it can be addressed.

The first speech was given by Nuratu Quarshie, the interim Violence Against Women Protection Program director. In her speech, Quarshie related the trauma that one faces from sexual assault to a river current. She said the pain of being sexually abused is like a current, and sometimes, someone tries to swim against that current by fighting their agony.

Quarshie also discussed support by relating it to ripples. She said there are numerous ways to create a ripple, including showing up at Take Back the Night.

"Being there for a friend, that's a ripple," Quarshie said. "Showing up and being here tonight, that's a ripple."

The second guest speaker was Rachel Stewart, the director of the SHARPP Center for Interpersonal Violence at the University of New Hampshire. To begin her speech, Stewart read a Frank O'Hara poem called "Meditations in an Emergency," which discussed depression and dreaming. Stewart consistently referred back to the phrase "hand on my heart. Hand on my stupid heart" throughout her commentary on sexual violence and its impact on survivors.

Stewart also mentioned how communication around sexual violence awareness has changed in the past decade thanks to survivors who have shared their stories.

"The landscape of communication around these issues has been so different partly because of the incredible survivors who have brought forward their stories," Stewart said. "Folks like Turana Burke, Kesha, Lady Gaga and the 156 survivors who testified against their trauma helped change that landscape."

The last guest speaker was Jillian Gilchrest, a state representative currently serving in West Hartford. The first topic she discussed in her speech was her personal experience of being raped and how she recovered from it. She talked about working as a counselor at a sexual assault crisis center.

A critical thing she cited in her speech was the lack of people who knew specific sexual violence terms back when she first began working at the center.

"Victim blaming, no one talked about that at all," Gilchrest said. "Gas-lighting, no one knew what that was."

While progress has been made in sexual assault awareness, there are still some setbacks, Gilchrest asserted.

"We have come so far in our understanding of sexual assault. But there's a backlash too," Gilchrest said. "When we did all that work on campus sexual assault, there was a backlash. And right now, after the MeToo Movement, there's been a backlash."

Gilchrest also shared an important lesson about how to be successful in raising awareness about sexual violence.

"When you work in the space I'm working in, it's not about getting to a place where you've fixed it," Gilchrest said. "It's about moving in as far as you can within the time you have and then handing it off to the next folks."

Between each guest speaker was a series of activities students did to promote wellness and build a community. Students could write a reflection letter to themselves and take advantage of an open mic, where students had the opportunity to share their survivor stories with those present at the event.

At the conclusion of the event, each attendee was given a small candle and was ushered into the hallway outside the Student Union Ballroom. In front of the ballroom entrance, a group photo was taken.

UConn women's center presents an event for sexual assault survivors and their allies to come together in the Student Union Ballroom on Tuesday, April 14, 2026. There were speakers, activities, and an open mic for those willing to share their stories.

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