

What were you wearing? YWCA exhibit aims to show truth behind rape

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
October 18 2017 11:44 AM



ALTON - The second floor of the Alton YWCA, located at 304 E 3rd St., currently houses a powerful exhibit showcasing the truth behind most rapes.

Called "What Were You Wearing?," the exhibit features clothing rape victims were wearing at the time of their assaults. The message behind the exhibit is rape is not

primarily about sex - it is about power. The name of the exhibit comes from a similar one held in Kansas University, and it stems from a question often asked of the victim in rape trials as well as a question asked among people who hear of the rapes. To many, that question is irrelevant, because it does not matter what anyone is wearing, no one deserves to be raped. However, to demonstrate the missed message of that question, some rape survivors decided to answer.

Clothing displayed in the exhibit included pajamas, sweat pants, cargo shorts, hoodies, a lifeguard uniform and even a little girl's pink sundress. Each item of clothing featured a story from a survivor next to it. While the stories were short - only a few lines of text - the messages they conveyed were emotionally powerful.

Jean shirt, jeans, and Toms. Everyone seems so confused when I tell them this. Like they can't understand what I'm saying. They can't understand what I was wearing. It's almost funny. Almost.

I had been working out, so Nike shorts ad a large t-shirt I guess. I'm sure I smelled bad. I even remember thinking that... think about how bad I must smell. Because I needed to think about anything but what was happening to me.

Black dress pants and a white shirt. I was getting ready to go to work, he started being flirty in the bedroom. When I nudged him away and told him I didn't have time right now, it got out of hand really fast.

A sun dress. Months later, my mother would stand in front of my closet and complain about how I never wore any of my dresses anymore. I was six years old.

My lifeguard uniform. She said guys can't be raped. She didn't stop.



Retired Madison County Circuit Clerk Judge Ellar Duff was viewing the exhibit Tuesday afternoon, at the same time as a reporter from Riverbender.com. Duff said the powerful message of the exhibit was rape was not based on sex. It was based almost entirely in power.

"The people who do this are people with low self-esteem," she said. "Rape is not about sex. Look at this exhibit. Rape is about power. People want to have power over people, and those kinds of people are people with low self-esteem."

Duff described the propensity of rape in this society as a sort of sickness. She said, except in cases of serial rapists, the people committing these crimes do not even consider the consequences of their actions. They do not think about the victims they have left behind and the mental and emotional problems their actions have given.

YWCA board member and resident yoga teacher Tamika Jackson worked as a domestic violence advocate in Seattle. Jackson said the culture creating such a prevalence of this behavior stems from unrealistic expectations. Like Duff, Jackson said rape is a crime of power through sex.

During her time as an advocate, working in the Pacific Northwest, Jackson said she tried to instill values of healthy self-esteem and sexual behavior into vulnerable and marginalized youth populations.

"I would tell the young people to stay away from pornography," Jackson said.

"Pornography gives unrealistic expectations about how men and women are supposed to behave during sexual encounters."

Jackson said the prevalence of pornography in today's society and level of technology is an increasingly-disturbing trend. While Google has fixed it since, Jackson said searching for an image of a healthy, fit black woman would produce an abundance of sexualized images instead of what she desired.

The exhibit will be displayed through Oct. 20 and is sponsored by the Oasis Women's Shelter. It is the Alton YWCA's main event for its national Week Without Violence campaign, which brings awareness to the growing problem of violence against women and children, as well as the problem of violence in general.

