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UNLV group educates against violence

Volunteers present in-class demos

By LAURA EMERSON
VIEW STAFF WRITER

College traditionally is a time to explore new interests, get involved in a new activity and figure out who you want to be in this world. For those involved in the Peers Advocating Anti-Violence Education group at UNLV, it is also a time to educate fellow college students.



Special to View/Karoline Khamis, left, violence prevention coordinator for the Jean Nidetch Women's Center at UNLV, hands out information during a Take Back the Night event held on the campus on Oct. 8. Khamis coordinates the Peers Advocating Anti-Violence Education organization on campus.

Sponsored by the Jean Nidetch Women's Center, the group is a reincarnation of the safety team that once operated on the UNLV campus from about 1996 to 2005. As a peer-based model, the anti-violence education group is funded by a grant through UNLV.

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The fall 2009 semester marks the second semester that the organization officially has existed. It began in spring 2009 and now has about eight participants.

The idea behind the group is that its members go inside classrooms at UNLV and educate their peers about topics including violence prevention, sexual assault, stalking and domestic violence.

Each participant completes 18 hours of training through the women's center. Training is offered once each semester and includes definitions of violence, legal ramifications and community services available to victims.

"PAAVE targets an audience that we're kind of missing in our community," Karoline Khamis, violence prevention coordinator for the women's center, said.

Last semester, the group saw about 500 students during its presentations.

Christina Hernandez, outreach and awareness coordinator for the women's center, said the facility receives requests from both professors and students for the group to present to a class.

The group strives to reach students via their peers, with the hope that the message will be more well-received.

"It's not any one student that will become a victim or a predator," Hernandez said. "It's important for them to be prepared."

During an in-class presentation, professors have the option of selecting what material the group will present. Examples of available topics include what classifies as domestic violence, media involvement in creating a rape culture, student services in or around UNLV, drug-facilitated rape, same-sex violence and violence against women of color. All presentations are made by two students at a time.

"It can be very frustrating doing this work," Hernandez said. "People don't want to talk about it because it makes it real."

The anti-violence group tries to be gender-neutral in its presentations, and Hernandez said it doesn't want to exclude any male survivors of violence.

Once peer educators learn the subject material, they are

encouraged to put a personal touch on it and present it in ways they feel are appropriate.

Of the group's participants, Hernandez said, "You see an injustice and you want to help create that social change."

Melissa Harvey, a graduate student in social work, has been with the group since its inception.

"I really believe in peer education," Harvey said. "Just culturally, youth experience and absorb things differently when they learn from their peers."

During Harvey's presentations, she tries to incorporate her audience by having them create skits about the subject matter and asking questions around the room about statistical information. She also encourages students to share information from personal experiences.

"I think the topics we discuss affect everybody, but they're still taboo topics," Harvey said.

Christie Robles, a senior studying human services, joined the group because it relates to her major. Even so, she said she has seen the effects of violence in her personal life when one adult in her family repeatedly abused another adult.

"I just saw how (the victim) struggled to get out of the situation," Robles said.

Robles said she's motivated to work with the peer educators so people don't make excuses about their behavior, and she can reinforce positive ideas around the campus.

Peers Advocating Anti-Violence Education is a recognized student organization at UNLV. For more information, call 895-4475 or e-mail karoline.khamis@unlv.edu.

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