

TAKING BACK THE NIGHT

“Take back the night!”

“Tonight is my night and I’m taking it back!”

These were just a few of the chants roaring through the early evening as a group of SGI-USA members in Chicago participated in a march to raise awareness about violence against women and children as a beginning to their summer activities.

It was the Southwest Women Working Together third annual Take Back the Night march, and SGI-USA youth were invited to participate because of friendships that Valerie Ewing, an SGI-USA women’s division member, developed within the community. Several groups, including the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, the Illinois Commission on Community Service and several elementary and high schools, joined in the planning and performances. Women and girls of all ages and different ethnic groups, belonging to different organizations within the community, marched in unity in one of Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods. As they carried signs with various pledges against violence and sang out chants, people driving by in their cars honked their horns in support and some even joined the march.

Before taking to the streets that evening, there was a rally where hundreds of people celebrated Victory Over Violence. People read dramatic poetry that illustrated the pain and suffering violence entails. There were skits and dances portraying the effects of violence on school-aged children. African drummers empowered the crowd with rhythms that gave a voice to protest against injustice. Various speakers shared their own experiences of dealing with violence, and in so doing, gave young women a voice to speak out about injustice and the tools they need to turn these voices into action. The messages were diverse and echoed of survival.

The SGI supported the event by setting up a Victory Over Violence table and having people sign the Victory Over Violence pledge sheets. They also handed out bookmarks so that people would remember what they pledged that evening. Jaleesha Maury, a recent Z-wave graduate, said: “The theme of stopping violence altogether is so powerful! It fits right in with what we’re doing in the SGI.” Valerie Ewing displayed a powerful artistic exhibit that depicted, through sight and sound, the damaging portrayal and perceptions of the female anatomy.

Joi Ford, a 13 year old young women’s division member, enjoyed participating in the event as well. She especially liked the t-shirt exhibit, an exhibit intended for all of the criminals that committed vicious crimes against women. Friends of the victims wrote emotional messages to the criminals on the t-shirts. After reading all of the them, Joi stated: “I can really feel each person’s pain. The messages convey the anger and fear. We must stop the violence.” Many of the SGI participants left the rally and march with a renewed spirit to fight injustice in their own lives and encourage other members of the SGI to become involved in community events that promote Victory Over Violence. It was a great beginning to a peace-filled summer.

As told to Lisa Young by Jaleesha Maury and Joi Ford, Chicago