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## WKU exhibit highlights survivors of sexual assault

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The “What Were You Wearing?” exhibit in the Western Kentucky University Student Union opened Wednesday.

PHOTOS BY GRACE RAMEY / grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

A bathing suit, a hoodie and sweatpants, basketball shorts and a T-shirt – it does not matter what a victim is wearing when they are sexually assaulted.

Those outfits and more now hang in Western Kentucky University's Downing Student Union for the "What Were You Wearing?" installation that opened Wednesday.

The gallery, organized a third time by WKU's Counseling Center, features real stories from local survivors of sexual assault along with recreations of the outfits they wore.



"Asking that question, 'what were you wearing,' puts a lot of victim-blaming on to our students," said Elizabeth Madariaga, sexual assault services coordinator. "These (stories) are all affiliated with WKU – staff members, faculty or students, past or present."

The installation includes items from men and women, from young children to young adults, who permitted their stories be shared.

One account came from a “Natalie” who was 18 years old at the time. A gray sweatshirt and sweatpants hang beside a plaque with her story.

“I was doing homework while he was playing video games. He asked for intercourse multiple times in a row and stopped taking no for an answer,” a plaque stated. “This continued for months. I haven’t worn the same clothes since.”

Installations like this began at the University of Arkansas in 2014, inspired by a poem titled “What I was Wearing” by Mary Simmerling. WKU’s exhibit coincides with Sexual Assault Awareness Month throughout April.

“This just goes to show, from pajamas to an oversized hoodie and T-shirt, it doesn’t matter what you wear,” Madariaga said. “It is really important for us to not put that blame on victims and instead to put that blame on the perpetrator by saying, ‘why are you doing this?’ ”

She added that since putting up the exhibit on Monday, three people have reached out wanting to add their stories to the collection. Madariaga said another story should be added by Monday.



“We will find the room to make that happen,” she said.

The goal of her work, she said, is to show everyone that “sexual assault is not part of the college experience.”

Madariaga was joined by representatives from Hope Harbor counseling services as well as WKU administrators, faculty and students.

Dean of Students Martha Sales addressed attendees, asking them to ponder the question, “what if?”

“What if this horrible thing that we see this exhibit is showing, what if that was you?” Sales said. “Your mom, your child? Your brother, your father? Your niece, your nephew? Your students, a faculty member, your colleagues, your roommate?”

She said with that in mind, the next question to ask is, “what now?”

“This is a perfect opportunity, as we are in this space in place today, for you to become more aware of what’s going on,” Sales said. “You understand this happens everywhere regardless of what you are putting on or taking off.”

The exhibit on the second floor of DSU in room 2041 is open to the public Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. throughout the month of April.

A list of events hosted by the center this month can be found on the WKU Counseling Center webpage under the “Sexual Assault Prevention Month” tab.

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