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Teaming up against rape

April 11, 2013 -What's striking about the new anti-sexual assault public service videos created by the Northwestern district attorney's office is their novelty. There is little else like them on the radio, TV or in the movies. The acting is nothing new and the scenarios are familiar, but the outcomes are remarkable.

The woman groped on the dance floor does not turn around and passionately kiss the stranger.

The tipsy college student is not turned on by a man pawing at her on the couch and saying, "Girl, you are looking good." And the girls cat-called by a group of guys at a party don't respond with flirty giggles and smiles.

Instead, the women stand up for themselves with the support of their male friends. Where else are you going to see that?

The new video and print spots are directed at college students, though the messages apply to everyone: Respect women. Don't be a passive bystander to sexual harassment and assault. Get consent before getting intimate.

The people behind the DA's public service announcements will have to do something big to raise their message above the advertising and entertainment din portraying women as sex objects, but it's a worthwhile endeavour.

One in four female students will experience a rape or an attempted rape during their college years. And every two minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted, according to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network.

Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan said last week that with his office's antisexual assault resources, this new awareness campaign and a dedication to the cause, sexual assaults on college campuses could be wiped out by 2020. This seems like an improbable goal, but we like what it implies about the attention Sullivan is willing to focus on eradicating rape.

Of course, all this work amounts to nothing if people aren't exposed to the campaign. The district attorney's office and collaborators at the Five Colleges and Greenfield Community College need to find a way to get their public service announcements in front of students and the community. A marketing plan is still being formed, but earlier this month, the DA's office held a community forum to discuss ways to get the message out to the public. Ideas included advertising on PVRTA buses, billboards, local television stations and during college sporting events. Some people suggested collaborating with artists to share the campaign message at exhibits, or to create murals. One person suggested playing the videos on the website where students are required to change their school email passwords. Others suggested working with bars and liquor stores, or putting ads on cups for students to use at parties.

The district attorney's office's new anti-sexual assault videos can be seen on YouTube as well as the DA's office website and Facebook page. We encourage people to watch the public service announcements, then tweet, post and email links to them to friends and family. It's not only the DA who should be raising awareness and helping to bring an end to sexual assault. It should be all of us.

One of the driving forces behind the campaign is the concept that bystanders can help prevent rape, just as they can help halt bullying. The videos show how people can step in to "disrupt, distract and redirect" men who are harassing women. They guide viewers on how to talk to friends about respecting women.

In the spirit of spreading awareness, we'll end with this: The local Center for Women and Community defines consent as "an enthusiastic yes" that does not have to be verbal and can be withdrawn at any point. Consent is the difference between sex and rape.

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