

# Harbinger's column

Harbinger is York University's peer counselling and referral service. Drop in at 214 Vanier residence or phone 667-3059-3632. Open 10-6, Monday to Friday.

## Rape Crisis Centre receives 400 calls a day

Last week, Harbinger, the York Women's Centre and the Women's Workshop (CDC) sponsored a film about rape called "Not a Pretty Picture." In the panel discussion that followed, Ilene Bell from the Rape Crisis Centre in Toronto talked about the reasons for the centre and how it works. The following is an excerpt from Ms. Bell's speech.

A woman who has been raped is put in a very precarious position. Rape is a crisis just like many others but with a difference in how it is treated and resolved. Many women never mention the fact that they've been raped because many think that their reputations will be destroyed. They don't get the counselling nor the legal aid they

need, and that's why we have the Rape Crisis Centre.

It's staffed mainly by volunteers though we have a few full-time staff members. The 45 volunteers who man the telephones also do face to face counselling.

### 400 CALLS A DAY

The most important part of our operation is the crisis centre that is open 24 hours a day so that there's always someone there to speak to a rape victim. We get about 400 calls a day and those aren't all calls from women who have been recently raped, as I was saying before. Some of them are not rapes, they are indecent assaults. Sometimes they are calls from women who feel they are being threatened, somebody's

following them or they're having problems with someone and think that a rape is imminent and they want advice.

Only a third of our clients go to the police. Though we don't press them to go to the police, we don't discourage them either. Our feeling is that rape is already a coercive experience, an experience of being forced to do something. We're not going to force that women to do anything that she doesn't want to do. What we will do is outline the pros and cons of the situation. What we do point out is that if she does go to the police, there's a chance that the man will be caught, there's a chance that he will be convicted, that he won't be around to harass her and that he won't be around to attack other women.

On the other hand, we make it very clear to her what's in store for her if she does report her rape to the police.

It's a very long process. It can take up to a year before a case actually goes to trial. She'll have to go immediately to a hospital. She

won't have any time to change her clothes, or take a bath or anything like that. After that, she'll be taken to the police station and questioned for four to five hours. She has to be prepared to go through that. She has to know what's in store for her. And if she decides to go through with it, we will send someone with her. We send one or two volunteers who go with her to the hospital and the police and will stay with her through the whole process. And that's a very important factor in persuading quite a number of women to go through with this. It's a very frightening experience to be the main witness in a rape trial.

We had a call from a woman a few months ago who had been waiting for four days in the witness room who had no idea of when she was going to be called up to the witness stand.

The crown attorney hadn't come in to talk to her because he hadn't seen fit to relay information about the kinds of questions he was going to ask her on the stand. She didn't even know who he was. She was so

frightened that she was ready to take a bus out to Saskatoon and never be heard from again. So we sent down a couple of case workers who explained the situation to the crown attorney.

In the end, he did speak to her and she was able to go through with the courtroom ordeal. That's a really important part of what we do.

We're also very concerned about changing people's attitudes about rape and about women who have been raped. That is the whole other side of our programme, - community education. We talk to groups at universities and we go out speaking to high schools and nurses in hospitals, trying to teach them how to deal with a victim when she's brought into the emergency room. And right now, we're starting a project to educate the police. We're going to be sending people out to the various police divisions, talking to the officers, the ordinary cops on the street and the detectives, trying to make them understand the trauma a woman goes through after she has been raped.



Bryon Johnson photo

Panelists Lorene Clark from U of T, Barbara Richmond from the Kingston Women's Centre and Ilene Bell from the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre discuss and explain what a woman experiences after she has been raped.

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