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Ouachita and Henderson to co-host “What Were You Wearing?” sexual assault survivor art exhibit April 2-20

Sarah Davis
Ouachita Baptist University

Ouachita News Bureau
Ouachita Baptist University

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For immediate release

Ouachita and Henderson to co-host “What Were You Wearing?” sexual assault survivor art exhibit April 2-20

By Sarah Davis

March 21, 2017

For more information, contact OBU’s news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208



ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – Ouachita Baptist University and Henderson State University will simultaneously host the traveling art exhibit, “What Were You Wearing?” The exhibit, which will be located in the McClellan Rotunda at Ouachita and on the first floor of Huie Library at Henderson, will run from April 2-20 for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. An opening reception will be held Tuesday, April 3, from 4-6 p.m. at the Captain Henderson House. The survivor art installation is free and open to the public, and viewers are cautioned that some may find the exhibit’s content disturbing.

This partnership between the two universities will help educate students and the community on several myths of sexual assault: that it only happens to women, that the predator is unknown and that what people are wearing has something to do with the assault.

“Our goal is to bring awareness to the reality of sexual assault – that it does not discriminate based on gender, age, or even what you were wearing,” said Ashlee Giles, student complaint coordinator at Ouachita. “This is an uncomfortable topic to discuss, so sometimes it seems easier to assign blame than to truly grasp the complexity of the situation. Viewers of this exhibit are allowed to wrestle with pre-conceived assumptions regarding how and to whom assault happens.”

The exhibit, which was first created on the University of Arkansas’ campus in April 2014, was inspired by Dr. Mary Simmerling’s poem “What I was wearing.” The poem is Simmerling’s response to the question from the night she became a victim: a white shirt, jean skirt and white shoes.

“If only it were so simple, if only we could end rape by simply changing clothes,” Simmerling wrote. “I remember also what he was wearing that night, even though it’s true that no one has ever asked.”

Jen Brockman, director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Education Center at the University of Kansas, and Dr. Mary Wyandt-Hiebert, director of RESPECT at the University of Arkansas, developed the

framework for an exhibit that utilized Simmerling's poem. Volunteers shared a brief description of what they wore and what happened the night they were sexually assaulted. The stories are paired with recreated outfits.

One example is, "Blue Pajamas. I wasn't feeling well, and he came over to 'take care of me.' I trusted him, and he raped me." Brockman and Wyandt-Hiebert wrote, "To ask the question 'what were you wearing?' cost the questioner nothing; there is no labor in making this statement. However, the survivor must pay dearly in not only their answer, but also in the burden of self-blame."

The Ouachita/Henderson exhibit will display multiple outfits on each campus. A diverse representation of outfits will be featured including women's, men's and children's clothes. Each campus will present different stories and clothing in their exhibit, allowing students and unknown victims to have a safe space.

"I'm excited we could partner with Ouachita on this exhibit," said Allison Vetter, Title IX coordinator at Henderson State University. "The simultaneous displays allow students and others a 'safe space' to view survivor stories as well as share their own. We will also provide information regarding on- and off-campus resources. I believe this will be a meaningful event for everyone who attends."

For more information, contact Ashlee Giles at gilesa@obu.edu or (870) 245-5200.

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