



RIOT GIRLS

Ditch your balaclava and don your stilettos: this season's protestor is young, smart and female. For too long rape has been a hidden crime with silent victims. But – to quote the SlutWalk slogan – “we’ve had enough” and a new generation of anti-rape protestors are making sure women’s voices are heard. Maria Hannah Bass meets two females on the frontline.

HEATHER JARVIS

SLUTWALK
TORONTO,
CANADA
3 APRIL, 2011



"I think we're beating around the bush here. I've been told I shouldn't say this, but if women don't want to be victimised, they should stop dressing like sluts."

When he spoke these words at a student safety workshop, Constable Michael Sanguinetti of the Toronto Police had no idea what he had started.

Outraged at the police force's attitude toward rape victims, Heather Jarvis organised SlutWalk, a protest that would go on to inspire a global anti-rape movement.

On the eve of Toronto's second annual SlutWalk Heather, a 26 year old PhD student at the University of Guelph, looks back on last year's protest.

I read the story in a student newspaper article online and I wanted to march down to Toronto police headquarters right away. When my friends started telling me that, actually, that was a good idea, I thought - why shouldn't I?

I mentioned the idea of a march to a colleague and he said: "What are you going to call it? A slut walk?"

Perfect. That police officer was not the first to throw this degrading word at rape survivors, and I wanted to throw it right back.

We gave ourselves just six weeks to organise some kind of rally before people lost interest.

I remember watching the numbers climb on the Facebook event. I couldn't believe it when it we reached 200 attendees, then 500 and then past 1,000. "Wouldn't it be amazing if a hundred people attended?" I said to Sonia, my co-founder. I had no idea more than 4,000 would turn up.

When the day came, the weather was on our side. It was early April but I still got sunburnt. About a dozen of us gathered in a public square in Toronto and watched as streams and streams of people started arriving.

There were all kinds of

groups carrying different banners – some serious, some playful. One woman dressed as a cop carried a sign saying: "To uniform fetishists, cops look like sluts."

I shuddered as I watched women in odd, outdated outfits carrying signs saying: "This is what I was wearing when I was raped. Tell me I asked for it."

"TO UNIFORM FETISHISTS, COPS LOOK LIKE SLUTS"

Other women had decided: "I'm going to wear my highest heels and my fishnets and my underwear and I'm going to show my bra, because it doesn't matter what I wear. When I was assaulted by my partner I was wearing pyjamas."

There were so many people we shut down an entire street in front of the police headquarters. I got up onto a raised sidewalk to give my speech and I was looking out onto thousands of crying,

cheering faces. Not for the first time that day, I found myself on the verge of tears.

I was assaulted several times when I was younger and I never dealt with it. I didn't tell anyone; I just closed myself off and tried to forget. I had lots of serious blame and shame problems which were hard to get away from. I don't even think I'm done yet. I still

need to keep telling myself: "I didn't do anything wrong."

I never intended it but through SlutWalk I was able to start dealing with my own assault history. Now anyone anywhere in the world can Google my name and find out that I was sexually assaulted, which is weird but a huge step for me. Even though I know better, I sometimes still blame myself for my assault but SlutWalk has helped me to start healing.



SUSY LANGSDALE

DISINVITE DSK
CAMBRIDGE, UK
9 MARCH, 2012

At 197 years old, the Cambridge University Union is one of the most prestigious debating societies in the world. In March 2012 it hosted a talk by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former head of the International Monetary Fund.

Strauss-Kahn – known as DSK – had recently been accused of rape by New York hotel maid Naffisatou Diallo and French journalist Tristane Banon.

A group of students and local residents, led by Susy Langsdale, a 22 year-old history of art student, decided to do everything they could to get the Union to disinvite DSK.

When the Union wouldn't listen, they organised a protest which would prompt the European Parliament to snub Strauss-Kahn.

We wrote a letter to the Union asking them to disinvite DSK. We didn't expect that letter to become as big as it did. It was picked up by several newspapers and generated a huge level of controversy and

debate around Cambridge.

Soon we had well over 3,000 signatures. Yet the Union refused to back down. So we decided to escalate.

Naffisatou Diallo's lawyer got in touch with us and on the day of DSK's speech he flew in from America to give a talk. He highlighted elements of Diallo's case such as the wounds and vaginal bruising found by the medical examiner.

That evening hundreds of us gathered at the Union with banners and placards. Police and private security guards lined the walls and kept us behind metal railings.

"SUDDENLY WOMAN AFTER WOMAN STARTED STANDING UP AND SPEAKING ABOUT BEING ASSAULTED"

I'd known that we were going to have a 'speak-out' but I never really expected what was about to happen.

One woman stood up and told the story of her own rape. And suddenly woman after woman started standing up and speaking about being assaulted.

I still get goosebumps remembering it now. I knew the statistics about the sheer number of British women who are raped, but it was shocking to see so many so close.

I was shaking when I got up to speak.

I had been thinking about being 19, on my gap year in Florence. I'd left a bar alone because the boy I was in love with had started kissing someone else. A man approached me in the street and asked me to go for a drink with him. Because I was so drunk and emotionally vulnerable, I agreed. He said he was taking me to a bar, but it wasn't a bar; it was his apartment. He threw me on the floor and started forcing oral sex on me.

So many women have stories like that and so few women have ever had the space to tell them. But after my speech everyone gathered

round and held me in a mass of warmth and cuddles. There was the most exceptional sense of sisterhood and solidarity.

Everything after that is just a blur of shouting, rattling fences, crying. One girl managed to climb over the railings and tried to get to the Union door but the guards knocked her down and dragged her away.

A bodyguard spat in my friend's eyes, another grabbed the hands of a girl trying to climb the railings and smacked them down against the metal. It was brutal.

I stayed in bed for three

days after the protest.

The emotional pain was phenomenal. It wasn't only my suffering that I was reliving; I had heard 18 other women's stories, women I know and love.

That night completely changed Cambridge for the women who spoke. Our speak-out was a tiny way to start out readdressing the imbalance between the platform afforded to men like Strauss-Kahn and the silence expected of rape victims.

But the thing that surprised me most was the impact we had on a friend of mine. Will had been undecided about our protest, but he came along to hear the attorney speak earlier in the day before he attended Strauss-Kahn's talk.

When Strauss-Kahn finished speaking, students were given the opportunity to question him about the IMF. Then Will stood up and, before he was silenced by bodyguards, asked: "How do you explain the vaginal bruising found on Naffisatou Diallo after your encounter in the hotel?"

That we made just one more man more aware of these problems makes me so proud.

