Sexual assault victims share stories at Take Back the Night
The event, held at Jefferson College, was meant to create awareness of sexual assault and violence.

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She is no longer a victim, she is a survivor, said a woman at Jefferson College of Health Sciences and Sexual Assault Response and Awareness' Take Back the Night event.

The speaker's goal was to make a difference by sharing her story, and she and other women were able to do that Tuesday evening.

Universities in the United States and around the world hold Take Back the Night events. The goal is to create awareness of rape, sexual assault and violence against women, men and children. About 50 men and women from Jefferson College, Carilion Clinic and the community attended Tuesday and took part in the walk to the former Patrick Henry Hotel, where many Jefferson College students live.

Two women, who did not identify themselves Tuesday, addressed the crowd. One said she was abducted and raped.

After her experience, she said she was afraid to go to work or leave her home.

"I was always looking over my shoulder," she said.

The second woman told her story through a poem she wrote. She described a sexual assault that occurred when she was 11 years old and how it affected her then and still today.

"I'm going to share my story of when I was sexually abused as a child," she said. "It's real and it's out there."

According to SARA, one out of three women is sexually assaulted in her lifetime.

SARA is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support and assist victims of sexual assault and their families. It offers free, confidential counseling services for victims of sexual assault and abuse, and provides a 24-hour support hotline.

Teresa Berry, executive director of SARA, has been advocating for sexual assault victims for 26 years.

She said that over the years, she has seen sexual assault awareness grow and change. More men are supporting women in their efforts to share their stories, gain back power and recover from sexual assault, she said.

"Sexual assault impacts everyone," she said. "It affects the individual, their family, their employer and their entire support system."

SARA serves the Roanoke Valley and surrounding area. It receives more than 350 calls a year and has seen volume increase since July, Berry said.

Nine trained volunteers assist the organization and with the 24-hour sexual assault hotline.
Berry stressed that SARA allows victims to seek help when they are ready and it is "never too late" to seek counseling and help after being sexually assaulted.

"A childhood experience sets the tone for our whole life," she said.

Ally Thomspon, 22, is a resident assistant at Jefferson College who is studying to be a registered nurse. She said in each college course there is a component about sexual assault and how medical professionals can better serve patients who come in with this trauma.

"Students will become health care providers and will then be the first point of contact for people who've been sexually assaulted," said Sarah Higginbotham, the coordinator of the group Violence Can End at Jefferson College. "If they have a bad experience with them, they will be less likely to open up to anyone else in the future."

Last year, Violence Can End received a three-year federal grant for $240,750 for its work to address violence against women.

The grant focuses on improving the safety of its student population and educating health care workers and the community about responding to violence against women.