

## **Teens Turn Painful Experiences into Opportunity to Raise Awareness**

The Rape Crisis Center of Catawba County, Inc. hosted a series of empowering programs for teen victims of sexual assault. This project, *Teens Emerge: Jeans for Justice*, enfranchised youth to include social justice advocacy as part of their healing process. With funding from the Civic Education Consortium's Small Grants program, participants learned how to "emerge" from their victimization into activists seeking changes in policies and laws related to sexual violence. Throughout the sessions, participants worked on the areas of self esteem, coping skills, anxiety, self awareness, and learned to effectively speak out against injustice and prejudices encountered by victims of sexual assault.

*Jeans for Justice* was conceived based on the 1999 decision of the Italian High Court, which overturned a rape conviction because the victim was wearing jeans at the time of the attack. Following the ruling, a group of female Italian lawmakers wore jeans to Parliament in protest, prompting additional protests across the globe. Thus, one of the first events hosted by *Jeans for Justice* participants was creating a public art exhibit featuring various pairs of jeans painted to represent their own stories, containing themes from violence to healing. Participants wanted to reach out to lawmakers, elected officials, and their own community in an effort to help others understand that injustice is happening not only around the world, but also in their own community. Youth also demonstrated in public forums by marching with their own jeans displayed in picket fashion, hopeful to raise awareness of the injustices that often exist for crime victims.



On October 6, 2008, participants exhibited many of their learned advocacy and communication skills when they hosted a "Candidate's Day" at the Catawba County Rape Crisis Center. Local and state governmental candidates were invited to tour the Center with a teen victim, as well as meet with the teens

to hear their personal experiences as victims in the judicial system, as well as their ideas regarding how to improve legislation in the areas of sex crimes and offenders.

“The goal of this program was to raise awareness and engage youth in speaking out about injustice,” commented Sarah Baker, a victim advocate. “It’s very important to see these young people become empowered.”

*Teens Emerge: Jeans for Justice* offered an outlet for each participant to speak out against the institutionalized discrimination they have encountered and the changes they envision legislators making to protect the rights of other victims. Whether at local political rallies or demonstrations at the county court house, the program created a lasting impact as participants used their experiences to heal themselves while also educating others.

Beginning in 1998, the Civic Education Consortium has received support annually from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to distribute grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to support innovative, collaborative civic education projects that prepare North Carolina’s youth for active, responsible citizenship. The program has awarded over \$537,000 to 89 outstanding projects in 81 of North Carolina’s counties. For more information regarding the Consortium’s Small Grants program, contact Christie Hinson at [hinson@sog.unc.edu](mailto:hinson@sog.unc.edu).