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District Attorney's office hosts symposium on campus sexual assault at Brooklyn College



Acting Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez delivers powerful opening remarks at an annual symposium on Campus Sexual Assault. Eagle photos by Edward King

By Edward King
Special to the Brooklyn Eagle

Acting District Attorney Eric Gonzalez is trying to spearhead the fight against sexual crime in Brooklyn, and on Oct. 27, he was at Brooklyn College where he organized a symposium on campus sexual assault to bring the conversation to the forefront.

"Now more than ever, it is critical for us to confront the plague of sexual violence and discuss ways to uproot it from society," Gonzalez said.

In late March, the DA's Office created the Campus Sexual Assault Response Initiative, a comprehensive program that connects victims of sexual crimes to a member of the DA's Victim Services Unit, provides training for college faculty and raises awareness for new students.

"We've been doing this as administrators, advocates, counselors, students and law enforcement since March of this year and it's unprecedented," Gonzalez said. "I don't believe that

this is happening anywhere else. We've been meeting with the Title IX coordinators to foster relationships and to begin a broader conversation about sexual violence."

The DA's Office started the conversation at Brooklyn College last month, but Gonzalez hopes the event will be an annual tradition at colleges throughout the borough. The inaugural event lasted about six hours and featured opening remarks from Gonzalez, Brooklyn College President Michelle Anderson, a Title IX panel, a bevy of workshops and a profound speech by keynote speaker Bea Hanson.



The audience carefully listens to Gonzalez's opening remarks.

"We know that when something horrible happens to us when we're young and don't get the proper support that we need, sometimes we miss a certain kind of resilience to future victimization," Hanson said. "It's important that when we are

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working with someone that there's access to services and access to resources and that these survivors are believed because that helps us build resilience."

Gonzalez explained that the focus on sexual violence is necessary due to alarming statistics involving sexual assaults, particularly on college campuses. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five females and one in 16 males are assaulted while they are in college.

Moreover, over 90 percent of victims don't report incidents to police or authority figures. That silence can place a tremendous amount of stress on victims, who can be blamed for what happened to them. Their silence also makes it harder for authorities, both academic and legal, to provide assistance.

"The aim of this initiative is to make sure that the word gets out," Gonzalez said. "We are encouraging people or report crimes whether they want to report it to a Title IX officer, or they want to report it to our police department, our Special Victims Bureau or directly to our District Attorney's Office.

"Too often people have been embarrassed or scared to report," Gonzalez continued. "The key for us is to make sure that survivors understand that the first and most important thing we will do at the DA's Office is tend to your well-being and then we'll take the next step and see if we can prosecute the case, how we want to do that and what that will look like."

The DA's Office hasn't scheduled another event yet, but given the recent public unrest over sexual assault in the media, another is sure to follow soon. Until then, Gonzalez said he is committed to the most important aspect of sexual assault — the victims.

"People need to have the ability to come forward and get their lives back on track and be able to deal with this trauma," Gonzalez said.

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