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The Long Walk Home

Every weekend thousands of Ohio University students enjoy the end of their week with friends at the various uptown restaurants and bars. For some, the thought of the walk home post-bars is an afterthought. They know they will get home somehow or go to someone's place for the night. But for many, the walk home is more intimidating. Four weeks into the school year, there have been 12 reported sexual assaults in Athens, Ohio. Averaging three reports a week, women are now nervously thinking about how they will make it from the bars in downtown Athens to their bed safely.

As the Overhang bar fills up every weekend, Mary Ryznar, a bartender at The Overhang, makes mixed drinks, pours beers, delivers shots, and scans the bar for any suspicious behavior. Mary keeps a watchful lookout over the bar to make sure it is a safe environment for all female patrons. Ryznar, a senior student at Ohio University studying journalism, is fed up with the sexual assault culture in Athens and has taken matters into her own hands. She and her friend Erin Halpin, decided enough is enough and created a group chat on the app GroupMe for women in Athens to use to ensure they find a safe way to get home at the end of the night. At any moment whenever someone is feeling unsafe or nervous about their walk home they can fire off a text and within minutes find a new friend to walk home with safely.

“I just kinda looked at my friend and said ‘I’m doing this.’ There should be a group chat for girls to talk to each other, interact, meet up with each other if they’re coming home from the

bars or the library or whatever. So I just kinda did it and 30 minutes later we had 500 people,” said Ryznar. The group chat now has over 1,000 members, all women.

“I was just so tired of hearing girls talk about how scared they were to walk home, and I mean, like, as a freshman and sophomore rape was a thing, but it isn’t as frequent as it is now,” says Ryznar. “So, by the fifth notification saying there was another assault, I just sat there and thought ‘this is so ridiculous.’”

The first message in the GroupMe “A safe walk home” is from Ryznar as she powerfully states, “all right ladies, this is a group chat for girls to text when they’re alone and drunk. No one can walk home alone anymore, this shit (has) gotta stop.”

Tony Heim, a senior journalism student at Ohio University, and Ryznar are very good friends. Heim says he could not be prouder of his friend. “Honestly, I don’t think I’ve been more proud of a friend than I am right now with Mary. She isn’t sitting back and waiting for action. She’s a driving force in change,” says Heim. Heim and Ryznar have been friends since their Sophomore years of college. Both majoring in journalism, they developed a bond in class that blossomed into a close friendship. “That’s just who Mary is. She’s a caring, and strong person who will stand up for what she believes in no matter what’s at stake,” says Heim.

The group chat is not just for a safe walk home from the bars on the weekend. It is also used for any dangerous situation at any moment of any day. One day just after the group chat was started someone said her younger sister was afraid to walk home alone from the library late on a school night. So, she messaged in the group chat “hey can someone go pick up my little sister? She’ll be at baker in 5 minutes.” Then moments later another message appeared, “oh

yeah, I got her.” On another day someone sent a text saying, “hey I am about to leave the library in a half hour, is anyone else leaving?” To which someone responded saying, “oh yeah, I am on my way home from work. I’ll just pick you guys up.”

“These two people have never met before and they are just walking each other home. So, it’s working just as Erin and I intended it to,” says Ryznar. Ryznar’s group chat is the talk of the town among girls in Athens. Not only has USA Today been interested about the group chat but the Ohio University Student Senate is interested as well. Ryznar and others from the GroupMe are collaborating with senior body President Maddie Sloat to develop an idea for an app students can use to monitor their walks home, contact a friend and/or the police in a discreet way and access a list of campus resources if a sexual assault occurs.

Ryznar is proud of the progress the community in Athens have made to help combat the horrific sexual assault culture that plagues Ohio University. But she says there is still a lot of work to be done, and it needs to be done by women. “There’s been so many guys with the GroupMe that offered their help, and we appreciate it, but a lot of the rapes have been targeted towards girls at the moment,” explains Ryznar. “So, adding a guy into the mix could throw off all the progress that these girls have created with each other.” Ryznar says that the overwhelming support from the fraternities has been major help to try and erase this issue and explains how she can not express how much their support meant to her. Lately, fraternities have been making massive posters that hang outside of their houses in support of sexual assault survivors. These banners have different messages about consent like “no means no” or “consent is sexy”, but all the banners are an attempt to stand behind and empower women.

Determined to make an impact on her own campus, Ryznar says she will not stop until this horrendous sexual assault culture is no longer acceptable in Athens or at Ohio University. She will be enrolled for a fifth year and will continue her fight against sexual assault. “Athens will be a better and safer place because of Mary,” says Heim. “She not only inspires me every day but hundreds of girls on this campus as well. I know she can do it, she can do anything she puts her mind to.”