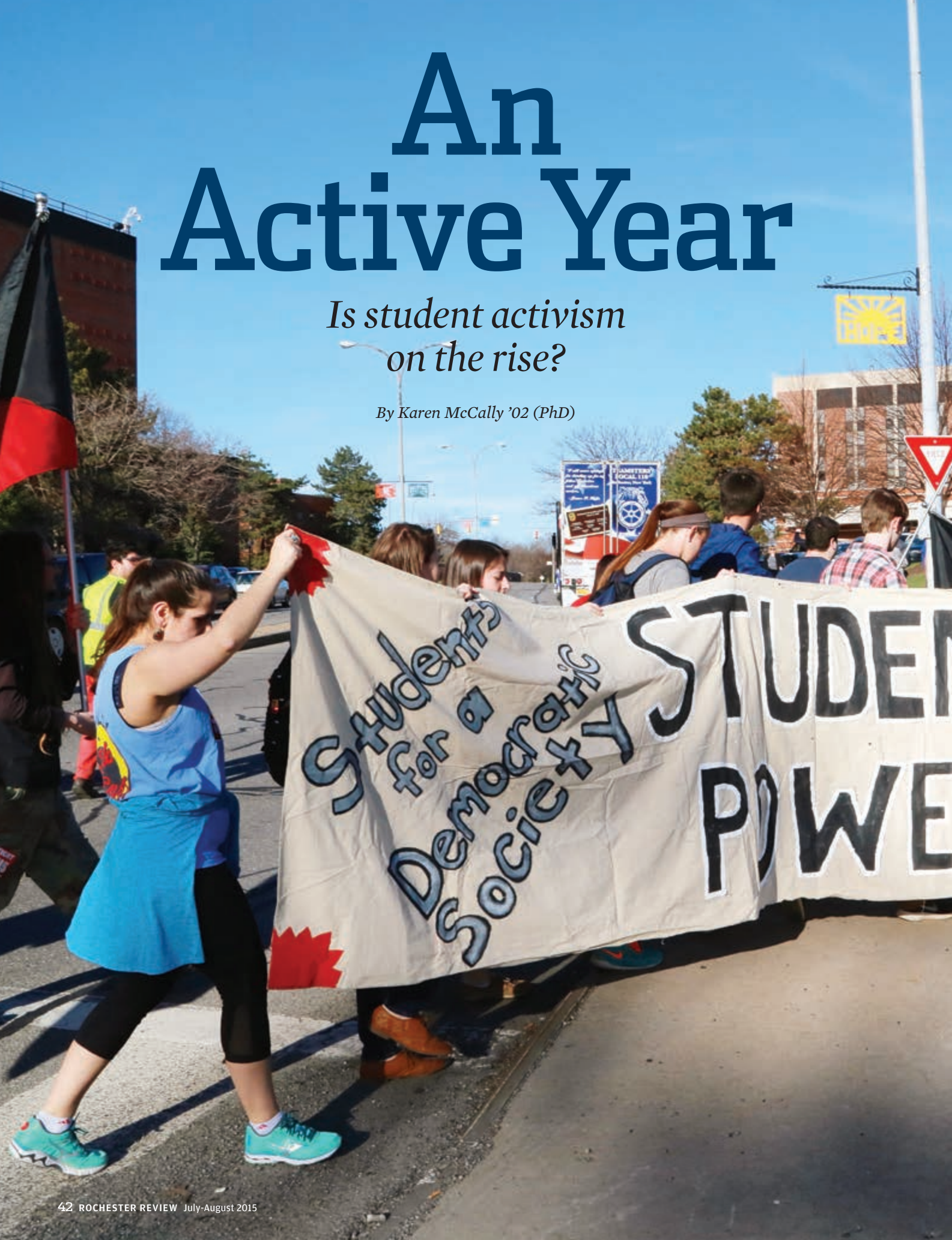
An Active Year

Is student activism on the rise?

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)



ANNETTE DRAGON

A blogger for *The Nation* pointed to "a national youth groundswell" on college campuses in the past year. A writer for *The Atlantic* declared a "renaissance of student activism."

Whether or not colleges are entering a new era of student political engagement is difficult to say. But it's been an active year.

It was hard to miss the campus protests and vigils in the aftermath of the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of law enforcement.

Or the image of Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz, lugging her mattress around in a performance piece called "Carry That Weight"—a metaphorical display of the burden borne by sexual assault survivors, which inspired "solidarity carries" around the nation.

These were only among the most visible and widespread initiatives. If you consider student activism as collective efforts by college students to foster social change, then activists have traditionally worked on behalf of a wide array of causes, from the local to the global.

Activists are rarely large in number on any campus, but they don't have to be numerous to have a noticeable effect—sometimes on policies, and often, on attitudes.

Rochester has generally been "a quiet campus," says Richard Feldman, dean of the College. But this year, "not so much."

In the past year, Rochester students led protests and vigils against police brutality; initiated a campaign, by students and for students, to tackle the problem of sexual assault; and forged an alliance with the movement for a $15 minimum wage and a union for fast-food workers. "That's part of college," Feldman says. "I like to see students engaged."

If activist groups have ever seen one another as competitors for attention or support, there's little sense of that among this generation. Lizzie Seltz '16, a microbiology major from Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, was a key organizer of an "equality symposium" in spring 2013. Leaders from the Black Students' Union, the Pride Network, the Douglass Leadership House, Active Minds, the Spanish and Latin Students' Association (SALSA), Liberty in North Korea (LINK), and other groups convened to share stories and build alliances.

"The main point was to open up a dialogue among the activist groups," says Seltz, a member of the Survivor Empowerment Group, or SEGway. "It would be nice to create a community of support within the activist and awareness groups on campus."

FLEXING THEIR MUSCLES: Rochester students join local fast-food workers and other members of the Greater Rochester community on a "Fight for $15" march from the Eastman Quadrangle to College Town.

FROM FERGUSON TO ROCHESTER

'We Realized the Power College Students Have'

Amber Baldie '15 remembers exactly where she was when she heard the news that Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown.

"I was in the IT Center," she says. It was just after 9 p.m. on the Monday evening before Thanksgiving, and a small gathering of students stood by the flat screen television affixed to the Gleason Library wall, scrolling on smartphones, waiting for the grand jury decision, which had been expected for days.

"When the announcement came," Baldie says, "I just broke down and started crying."

It had been a long and anxious wait. Baldie, a statistics major from Gates, New York, and several of her friends had spent the weekend making signs, in anticipation of a decision they feared wouldn't go the way they wanted. So when St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCulloch rose to the podium to announce the grand jury decision, the news was not entirely a surprise. And yet still, it was a shock. Reflecting on that moment, several months later, from the living room of the Douglass Leadership House on the River Campus Fraternity Quad, Baldie confides, "We still did have a little bit of hope."

When Baldie walked out of the IT Center, and onto the platform where students gather to await buses and shuttles, she carried a sign with the words "Hands Up. Don't Shoot." As she and her friends stood with their signs, they were joined by others, and within a short period of time, a crowd had gathered. The demonstrators stood in a circle, holding hands, as Natajah Roberts '14 came forward and began leading the group in chants. The participants in the spontaneous gathering marched across the River Campus. Then they headed up Elmwood Avenue to College Town. "That's when we felt this momentum," Baldie says.

The momentum was felt nationally. That same moment, protests were erupting in more than 180 cities, and on college and university campuses, around the nation. The demonstrations on the evening of November 24 had been so swift, so coordinated, and so national in scope that mainstream news media outlets began referring not merely to the Ferguson protests, but to a movement—a new civil rights movement, reacting to police violence against black Americans and organized around a simple declaration: Black Lives Matter.

But November 24 was less the beginning of a movement than a turning point, both nationally and in Rochester, where students and recent alumni had already launched a new community organization, BLACK: Building Leadership and Community Knowledge.

The previous August, when news broke of the fatal shooting of Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black teenager with no criminal record, protests erupted immediately in Ferguson. And Baldie, Makia Green '14, and Anansa Benbow '15 started texting.

"Our hearts were heavy," says Green, a psychology major from New York City who was returning to campus for her final semester. They'd been following events closely on Twitter. News outlets told one story, while people on the ground in Ferguson told another. "We started hearing their stories," Green says of Ferguson residents. "And it was affecting us. About that time, Anansa, Amber, and I had a conversation about what we could do."

Baldie, Benbow, and Green, who graduated last spring, had been friends from their first days in Rochester. They'd held the presidency of the Douglass Leadership House, the Black Students' Union, and the Minority Students Advisory Board, respectively. Green and Baldie were active in theater. Benbow was part of Students for a Democratic Society. All three women had won major awards for their contributions to the campus community. And they'd reached beyond the campus as well, joining local community groups such as Metro Justice.

When they arrived back on campus, they met with Roberts, then an organizer for the Service Employees International Union, and Adrian Elim '13, a native of Rochester's 19th Ward, and a cofounder of the Rochester multimedia design and production company Brothahood Productions. The week before school started, the friends tapped into their local networks, calling for a meeting to be held at the Flying Squirrel Community Space on Clarissa Street.

The site was significant. "Clarissa Street used to be a very prominent black area before Urban Renewal," Elim says, referring to the federally subsidized demolition of many city neighborhoods, throughout the United States in the 1960s. Clarissa Street was the heart of black Rochester, with a bustling mix of stores, clubs, and doctors' and lawyers' offices. Today, though it's home to three churches, it's otherwise a sparse mixture mostly of garden apartments. "We really wanted to pay homage to that energy that used to be there."

About 60 people turned up at the Flying Squirrel on the evening of

BLACK LIVES MATTER: "It's important that we talk about our experiences, and why this matters," says Green, an organizer of the November 25 march (above) who traveled to Ferguson, Missouri, last fall.

ADAM FENSTER

September 12. It wasn't immediately clear what would grow out of it. "We were all emotional," recalls Roberts. "It really was a major moment of mourning in the black community." But as Roberts, Baldie, Benbow, Elim, and Green facilitated the gathering, it became clear, says Roberts, that more was at stake than combatting police violence against people of color. "We were a group of a lot of young people of color, gathered in a room, who cared about the black community. And there wasn't already a group like us."

Rosemary Rivera, a local activist, met the five young leaders for the first time that night. "They captured the attention of many of us who have been doing this for ages, way before Mike Brown," she says. The city's activist community had aged. "When you'd go to rallies, you'd see the same people." They needed new and younger energy. Rivera recalls feeling "overjoyed."

Out of the meeting came BLACK.

The name is both a clear statement of racial pride and identity, and an acronym for Building Leadership and Community Knowledge, a phrase that sums up the aims of the group, whose members refer to it as a grassroots collective. In the 10 months since Baldie, Benbow, Elim, Green, and Roberts founded BLACK, the group has established a reading group; held film screenings; developed a program for volunteers to walk children to school; established an after-school tutoring program at the Monroe County Public Library branch on Arnett Boulevard; planted the Causing Effects community garden; established an ongoing social media campaign featuring local, black-owned businesses; held a black-owned business workshop; and passed out T-shirts and buttons such that, on any given day, walking down the tree-lined streets of the 19th Ward, you might see someone affiliated with the group.

When BLACK got under way last fall, one of its first initiatives was to send its own delegates to Ferguson for a four-day "national call to action." In early autumn, Ferguson was emerging as a training ground for community organizers. Rivera and another local activist, Ricardo Adams, traveled to Ferguson shortly after the founding of BLACK, and when they returned, strongly urged the young Rochester leaders to make a trip there as well. Through BLACK, Green, Benbow, Elim, and Roberts launched a crowd-funding campaign to finance their trip. And over a long weekend—one that Benbow notes fortuitously coincided with Arts, Sciences & Engineering's fall break—they drove 13 hours to Ferguson to participate in the series of demonstrations known as Ferguson October.

Benbow, a linguistics major from Troy, New York, and Green prepared for the trip as though it were a high-stakes exam. "Makia and I had been watching the livestream every night for two weeks straight. We had been finding people on Twitter to follow, and reading a lot of articles," Benbow says. Rivera and Adams put them in contact with Ferguson activists who agreed to be their hosts. For four days, they participated in sit-ins and marches. They saw the military tanks, helicopters, and riot gear. They got arrested on the charge of unlawful assembly, and they were jailed along with protesters, many of them also college students, from around the country.

"We realized the power that college students have," says Benbow, noting the national media spotlight that shone on Ferguson during the four-day event. Benbow and Green both say they were subjected to excessive force—struck by fists and clubs, and pulled by their hair. But Benbow thinks things would have been worse had they not been college students, and from out of town.

"Being college students and not being from there, I think we were treated differently. It would have been different if we were all just black people from Ferguson."

Benbow is forthright when she says Ferguson was "like a war zone." But beneath that, she found community roots that she believes are stronger than many people outside Ferguson realize. "What I think a lot of people miss about the community down there is the foundation of love. It caught me off guard a bit."

Benbow, Elim, Green, and Roberts left Ferguson prepared to bring their stories back to Rochester, and to put what they'd learned about community organization into action.

For Benbow and Green, the transition back to campus was difficult. They were bruised, emotionally as well as physically, and talking about the experience could be disheartening. Green recalls conversations on social media, in particular, in which she and her friends were deemed "overdramatic," and "a nuisance." But they were persistent. They drew strength and support from friends, including staff members at the Paul J. Burgett Intercultural Center and the Office of Minority Student Affairs. The week before the grand jury

announcement, Green, Benbow, Baldie, and Alexandra Poindexter '15, a political science major from Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and then president of the Black Students' Union, held a die-in in Wilson Commons.

"It was nerve-wracking," says Benbow. On a Friday afternoon, a time of heavy traffic in the student center, they put up caution tape and lay on the ground. They'd arranged for speakers, including a slam poet. Benbow recalls people gathering, on the balcony and on the stairs, watching, and listening.

The next week was a turning point. The day after the grand jury announcement, the students organized a demonstration at the entrance to the River Campus on Elmwood Avenue. Publicizing the event on campus and through BLACK, they drew students, faculty, staff, administrators, and members of the community.

It was an organizational feat, and one in which Green, Benbow, Roberts, and Elim drew heavily on their experience in Ferguson. With Baldie, Poindexter, and others, they worked in concert with the University's Department of Public Safety. They dispersed throughout the crowd to keep it focused, peaceful, and on message. They traded turns leading the group in chants. Green served as spokesperson, taking interviews with local news outlets, explaining what the demonstration was about, and what protesters meant by the deceptively simple slogan Black Lives Matter.

Through BLACK, the leaders were establishing a presence around the city. The group organized a downtown rally that attracted some 500 people. In the weeks and months ahead, students, including members of BLACK, held events on the River Campus every Friday—"Ferguson Fridays"—organized around the theme Black Lives Matter.

During all this time, BLACK continued to build itself up in the 19th Ward, and to further flesh out its programming and philosophy.

The 19th Ward, just across the Genesee River from the University's main campus, is a neighborhood in which middle class, working class, and poor residents intermingle. But many of the people who call the 19th Ward home, especially its predominantly black youth, Elim says, have absorbed negative images about black life and culture. In July, the group will launch a new initiative called "I Define Myself." Elim paraphrases a quote from Audre Lorde. "She said, 'If I do not define myself for myself, I'll be crushed into other people's fantasies of me and be eaten alive.' And that's a really important point for our youth."

Elim claims among his heroes not only Lorde, but James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin, two black activists who were also, like Lorde, gay. He does it to underscore a central tenet of Black Lives Matter. Elim stresses that *all* black lives matter.

"When we say Black Lives Matter, we mean black LGBT lives matter, the lives of black women matter. We have to come together as a community and take a look at all the nuances of what it means to be black."

BLACK, he says, is "a lifestyle. It's not a job or an extracurricular activity. We're talking about changing habits."

Since the beginning of BLACK, Elim says, he's changed a few of his own habits. He pays attention to where he spends his time and his money, supporting black artists and black businesses. The group is rooted in a long tradition of black community uplift, stretching back a century, to Marcus Garvey, and to the 1960s, with Malcolm X. The founders of BLACK have added their own twist.

On Facebook, BLACK declares itself "rooted in the minds and spirits of the U of R and the 19th Ward." BLACK is Meliora brought to bear on the tradition of black empowerment and community self-reliance.

"We want to build a self-sustaining structure," Elim writes in a Facebook message. "We are here for the long haul."

FIGHTING SEXUAL ASSAULT

'It's Important That the Students and the Administration Help One Another'

Alisa Jimenez '14 and Emily Sumner '15 were both students at Rochester when they met in a therapy group for survivors of sexual assault. They came from different communities—Jimenez from Syracuse, and Sumner from the Boston suburb of Bedford—and they had different circles of friends. But when it came to sexual assault, Jimenez says, "We could understand each other in ways that I've never really been able to relate to anyone before."

The two women became friends outside of the group. In the summer of 2013, Jimenez had just returned from study abroad in Belgium when she received an email from Sumner. "She wrote, 'We have all this energy,'" Jimenez recalls. It was time to turn it into something of value.

"We're both very proactive people," says Sumner. "We wanted an

WALK A MILE: Rochester students march against sexual violence in an event titled "Walk A Mile in Her Shoes." As part of the annual spring event, carried out at colleges and other sites around the nation, men as well as women are encouraged to walk the mile-long route in high heels.

ALYSSA ARRE

outlet where we could bring our anger" about sexual assault "into something positive. And Alisa and I didn't really see an outlet like that on campus."

Sexual assault, which includes any nonconsensual sexual activity, has long been a problem on college campuses. Last fall, the Justice Department confirmed what advocates for victims—many of whom prefer to call themselves survivors—have long claimed: campus sexual assaults are vastly underreported.

When Jimenez and Sumner returned to Rochester, they scheduled a meeting with Morgan Levy, the University's Title IX coordinator. Levy met with them and put them in touch with Melissa Kelley, a health educator at University Health Service.

"We didn't know where to start," says Jimenez, frankly. But in conversations with Kelley and Levy, their plans started to take shape. By the end of the semester, they'd launched the Survivor Empowerment Group, or SEGway.

As their name suggests, SEGway members serve as ambassadors, reaching out to students to make them aware of sources of help, and putting students who have been sexually assaulted in touch with sources of help on campus that they might not know about, or that they might be hesitant to approach. Kelley says SEGway's contribution to students is invaluable.

"Just because I sit in this office doesn't mean anyone knows I'm actually here," she says. Nor, she adds, would a student who has been assaulted "just trust any random person who says 'I can help you.' "

Kelley serves as an advocate for students who have been sexually assaulted. She's "a confidential resource," she says, stressing that she lays out the options for students and, if a student decides to make a formal report, whether on campus, to the police, or both, to offer assistance.

On her own initiative, Kelley has become the go-to resource for students who've been sexually assaulted. "This is not part of my job description," says the health educator, whose primary work is to teach undergraduate courses and run workshops for students on topics such as drugs, alcohol, and sexual health. But, she says, "My personal and professional interests tend to be in sexual health and women's health." She began her career as a community educator at Planned Parenthood and as a volunteer rape crisis counselor. Shortly after she came to the University six years ago, she approached staff members in the Office of the Dean of Students, including Kyle Orton, director of the Center for Student Conflict Management. "We talked things over, and I said, 'I think I can be helpful.' "

She has been, according to Orton, who works closely with both Kelley and Levy in his role as facilitator of sexual assault judicial proceedings on campus. But she's been able to better support students since the advent of SEGway. Students started "just showing up" at her office. "I've had students stand in my doorway and say, 'Hi, I heard you can help me,' " she says.

"It's important that students and the administration help each other," Sumner says. "A student is more likely to go to another student than to someone in administration to talk about an experience they've had. And they aren't going to immediately call Public Safety. They're going to want to go to their friend, or they're going to want to stay in their room, and they're going to want to hide."

Both Jimenez and Sumner have now graduated. Jimenez, who majored in anthropology and international relations, works for a Midtown Manhattan law firm, in its office for global diversity and social responsibility. Sumner, who graduated this spring with a degree in brain and cognitive sciences, is headed to graduate school at the University of California, Irvine.

But since they founded SEGway, it has become a well-established group. Its membership of rising sophomores, juniors, and seniors have helped spread the word about the campus sexual assault policy. They've educated students about sexual consent through programs such as "Stop, Ask, Clarify," which Kelley was preparing when she first met Jimenez and Sumner. In the next year, they plan to have the policy translated into multiple languages for the increasingly global student population. And they've held discussions on social and cultural factors that perpetuate sexual violence.

Orton calls SEGway's form of collaborative activism "groundbreaking." He works closely with male students, who are coming to realize that men have a key role to play in preventing sexual assault.

In the spring of 2014, Orton and professional colleagues in Residential Life, the University Counseling Center, Fraternity and Sorority Affairs, and the Department of Athletics and Recreation, held an open conversation for men about sexual assault. Years ago, a group of male students had formed an organization called Men Against Sexual Assault, or MASA. But as the members graduated, the group fizzled out.

Orton thought it was time for male students once again to play a

greater role in prevention. After that conversation, Jacob Gusman '16, David Markakis '15, '16 (T5), and Michael Silverstein '15 approached Orton. Gusman and Silverstein are fraternity brothers in Sigma Phi Epsilon. "Jake and I talked about it a lot," Silverstein says about sexism and sexual assault. "It frustrated us, because we were cognizant of it, and we saw plenty examples of it not being recognized." Markakis, a mutual friend, was a leader in College Feminists. They told Orton they were ready to step forward to revive a role for male students.

Over the summer, the four men began to meet over Skype and FaceTime. In the fall, Gusman, Markakis, and Silverstein founded Men Opposing Violence Everywhere, or MOVE.

The group offers a space for men to discuss topics related to sexual assault and masculinity openly. They reach out to fraternities and sports teams, and sometimes, the groups come to them.

MOVE is a small group, with only five or six active members. It asks a lot of its members, who write discussion programs themselves. Gusman, a biomedical engineering major from Newton, Massachusetts, says the group addresses both sexual assault and the broader issue of cultural constructions of masculinity. Last spring, for example, MOVE held a panel discussion called "Man Up: What Does It Mean to Be a Man?" "It's something people don't talk about that much," Gusman says regarding notions of manhood, adding that men lack a "healthy guide" on what it means to be a man.

Silverstein, who graduated in the spring with a degree in biomedical engineering, emphasizes that MOVE's approach is not to preach, but to initiate dialogue.

"You can't go into a situation being accusatory, like, 'You guys are idiots. How are you not thinking of these things?' It's important to ask questions, like, 'What makes you feel that way?' "

The atmosphere on campus is broadly supportive of SEGway and MOVE. The College Feminists have partnered with SEGway and MOVE on multiple initiatives. When the Students' Association announced its participation in the national, White House–initiated "It's On Us" campaign against campus sexual assault, President Antoinette Esce '15 and Vice President David Stark '16 said, "We are proud of the work our student organizations do to spread awareness and understanding about the issue of sexual assault."

Orton says reports of sexual assault at Rochester have risen recently, following national trends. In 2011, there were two reported incidents of forcible sex offenses on all undergraduate campuses, including the Eastman School, according to statistics collected in accordance with the federal mandate known as the Clery Act. In 2012, that number rose to five, and in 2013, it was 10.

But he believes it's not because the numbers of incidents themselves are rising. "It reflects people feeling more comfortable reporting and feeling confident that the University will look for the truth and support what the truth is," he says.

Adjudicating sexual assaults on campus is not easy. Several prominent universities have stumbled, and in May, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights informed the University that it is investigating a student's complaint about the handling of her sexual assault case. The office has opened investigations at more than 100 colleges and universities around the country.

Orton and Levy will be spending much time assisting the Office of Civil Rights in gathering information. In the meantime, Orton says, students have been critical in the fight against sexual assault, and have made progress that has benefitted the entire campus.

"We wouldn't be as safe a campus as we are now without SEGway and MOVE." ®

For complete information on the University's sexual misconduct policy and resources, see the website at Rochester.edu/sexualmisconduct.

FIGHT FOR $15

'Slowly but Surely, the Attitude Has Been Shifting'

Miles Meth '16 is amazed at the progress made by the Fight for $15 movement since its inception in the fall of 2012.

"Two or three years ago, a $15 minimum wage was like a bad joke in a board room," says the anthropology major from Newton, Massachusetts. "But now, it's a legitimate demand." He cites a May 6 op-ed in the *New York Times* by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, "Fast-Food Workers Deserve a Raise," in which the governor outlined an executive action that's expected to bring the state's minimum wage close to $15 an hour. "Two, three years ago," says Meth, "he just wouldn't have been able to do that."

Fight for $15 is a nationwide campaign, spearheaded by the Services Employees International Union, or SEIU, which, according to the campaign's website, demands "a $15 an hour" wage for fast-food workers "and the right to form a union without retaliation."

The movement has been gathering steam, with cities such as Seattle, Oakland, Chicago, and Los Angeles, all adopting plans to raise the minimum wage for businesses operating in their borders to levels approaching, or at, $15 an hour.

Meth, a member of Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS, began working on the Fight for $15 campaign locally last fall, as an intern with the activist group Metro Justice. Working with the group's organizing director, Colin O'Malley, Meth helped instruct fast-food workers in their legal rights and in political organization, and educate the broader public on the campaign within the context of the American labor movement.

LABOR-INTENSIVE: "I'm interested in labor in general. Labor really gets at the root of a lot of problems in the country," says Meth, a member of Students for a Democratic Society, on his involvement in the Fight for $15 movement. "Just having people earning a living wage—that's the base to start from."

Meth's work with Metro Justice convinced him that Fight for $15 belonged at the top of SDS's agenda. Accordingly, he adopted the role as official liaison between Metro Justice and Rochester's SDS.

SDS, which is a national organization, has become one of the best-known student activist groups since its founding by University of Michigan students in the early 1960s. But the organization fizzled out in the late 1960s, and was revived as a chapter-based organization only in 2006.

At Rochester, SDS has been focused mostly on campus service workers. Over the past year, the group has supported an effort to include the ideas surrounding the Fight for $15 campaign in talks between some employees and the University's administration.

Natajah Roberts '14, who was a member of SDS as a student at Rochester, went on to become an organizer for SEIU after graduation.

Through the fall, she played a major role in the Fight for $15 campaign locally, as well as in the founding of BLACK, or Building Leadership and Community Knowledge (see article, p. 44). Roberts, now a community organizer for Citizen Action of New York, says her work for economic justice is inseparable from her work for racial justice, and vice versa.

"Racial injustice is tied to economic inequality, and more devastating even than income inequality for black people is wealth inequality," she says.

Wealth refers to long-term investments such as homes, or funds to pay for college. Low-wage employment fuels both income and wealth inequality, but, Roberts notes, wealth inequality affects future generations, placing blacks ever further behind white counterparts.

In the days leading up to the Fight for $15's nationwide strike day last December, SDS and Metro Justice worked together to expand the local base of support. In the spring, Metro Justice added another SDS member, Jordan Polcyn-Evans '17, as liaison.

"This is an issue that very much affects the city," says Polcyn-Evans, who grew up in Rochester.

And, he emphasizes, it affects the University's own neighborhood. Fast-food establishments line Mt. Hope Avenue, including in College Town.

"We are so close to this issue. Literally, physically, so close," he says.

On a second nationwide strike day, held on April 15, Polcyn-Evans addressed a rally of students, workers, and community supporters on the Eastman Quadrangle. In the days and weeks before, he and other members of SDS had secured the support of multiple campus organizations, including College Feminists, the Black Students' Union, the Douglass Leadership House, and the Pride Network, and helped rally off-campus religious and community groups as well. The Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* estimated the crowd in the "hundreds."

To be sure, not everyone on campus agrees with the movement's goal. "I certainly butt heads with some students," Meth says. "But overall, I'd say slowly but surely, the attitude has been shifting."

ANNETTE DRAGON