

Our Bodies Ourselves' guest speaker discusses the history of fighting sexual and domestic violence

Reese Buckley, Staff Writer

Suffolk's Our Bodies Ourselves hosted an open group discussion with activist Craig Norberg-Bohm April 16, exploring how men can be allies in the prevention of sexual and domestic violence.

Founded in 1969, Our Bodies Ourselves is an activist initiative group focused on women's health and sexuality. What began as an organization that published groundbreaking medical information for women in print in 1970, they have since transitioned to a fully online format, updating and revising the original issue nine times for the public.

Hosted in the Sawyer Building, Our Bodies Ourselves welcomed young men into a warm and inviting space—complete with music, food and an atmosphere for open and honest conversation.

Craig Norberg-Bohm, the event speaker, has worked on issues of gender violence prevention since the late 1970s, and has spent decades encouraging men to take an active role in challenging harmful gender expectations.

About a dozen male students attended the event, many initially quiet but growing more engaged as the discussion unfolded, while others quietly stepped out as time passed.

Norberg-Bohm first began the event with a short lecture on the history of the fight against domestic violence throughout his career, the importance of promoting healthy masculinity and his recognition of the detrimental effects of the patriarchy on young children. He held space for all the attendees in the room that might have been affected by this subject, and continuously reinforced his support and judgement free spirit to the audience.

Norberg-Bohm argues that much of the violence against women is rooted in culture, which is something that can be contested and reformed.

"Men must care about the violence men do to women and want to see it decreased." Norberg-Bohm said. "Lots of men don't think it's about them, since they are privileged by it [their masculinity]."

Socially-enforced masculinity makes building awareness and prevention all the more difficult, but having male students take initiative and attend the event is a step in the right direction, Norberg-Bohm believes.

Anna Dippolito, a Suffolk student worker for Our Bodies Ourselves, explains the struggles of these conversations.



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Activist Craig Norberg-Bohm presenting for Suffolk's Our Bodies Ourselves event.

“I think it’s hard when you bring them in to point fingers in a young men and boys situation—they can feel attacked. It feels like a taboo subject to talk about or they feel uncomfortable by the topic to begin with,” Dippolito said.

One of the biggest challenges in spreading awareness of domestic violence is encouraging men to stay engaged in these discussions without becoming defensive and unreceptive. Dippolito explains oftentimes men are hesitant to hold their peers responsible for both casual and overt forms of patriarchal reinforcement, as it can feel like they are damaging their friendships or taking individual blame.

Though this event was focused on sexual violence and assault, Norberg-Bohm worked to address one of it’s most fundamental issues, being harmful gender expectations. Domestic violence, which is primarily perpetrated by men against women, largely results from a lengthy process of encouraging young boys to be “strong, emotionless and independent” – all of which are traits that poorly translate to healthy communication and conflict handling. The characteristics of a “strong man” often lead to violence when the emotional overflow has no safe place to go.

Bereket Nelson, a junior at Suffolk attending this event, emphasized the importance of holding men accountable for harmful actions. When asked about the most important traits of an ally, Nelson said that they should be “universally principled” in their abilities to call out friends and strangers alike.

Many of the attendees focused on their ability to stop gender-based violence when witnessed in public, as opposed to changing the culture in their own spaces.

Norberg-Bohm stresses the significance of traits that actively work to dismantle the patriarchy.

“Good allies tend to listen well, and naturally find ways to be useful,” said Norberg-Bohm.

He also encourages privileged voices to “learn about stepping back and giving space for conversation.”

For Norberg-Bohm, this message has been central to his fight for domestic violence advocacy, and dismantling gender pressures from men in the hopes of domestic violence prevention. Curiosity, resourcefulness and active change is vital to fostering collective responsibility for the fight against violence.

This event aligns with the broader mission of Our Bodies Ourselves, which has spent over 50 years fighting for education, empowerment and open dialogue around health and sexuality. Organizers hope this discussion inspires continued conversations on campus, and that more men are aware of the domestic violence rampant across the globe, and their roles as allies and dismantlers of domestic abuse.