



NUALA CABRAL – FAAN Mail

My name is Nuala Cabral and I am 32 year old educator who works at Temple University. I have lived in West Philadelphia for 5 years after moving to Philly to attend graduate school. I have been volunteering with HollaBackPHILLY around community engagement and educational workshops for three years.

Before I begin with my personal testimony on this issue, I would like to get a pulse of the room on this issue. Please raise your hand if you have experienced any of the following interactions: How many of you have been followed by a stranger on the street? How many of you have been cat called or shouted at by a stranger? How many of you have been complimented by a stranger about your body or appearance, but in a way that made you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed? How many of you have been touched or grabbed by a stranger? These are all forms of street harassment.

Throughout my 20's I lived in several cities and saw that street harassment was present everywhere. I realized that navigating street harassment is like an art. Growing up I would ignore catcalls and other forms of harassment, but later found myself in spaces where ignoring these behaviors could lead to aggressive behavior and violence, for example, getting a bottle thrown at your head. Although street harassment is not unique to Philly, out of the five cities I have lived in on the East Coast, I have encountered some of the most aggressive and persistent street harassment here in Philadelphia.

There have been days that I have encountered or witnessed street harassment several times during my commute to and from work. This is especially scary at night. I remember one evening in particular last year that was exceptionally disturbing. After experiencing relentless flattery on the El Train, I left the 46th train station where a young woman walking in front of me was being questioned and harassed. "What is your name?" the man kept asking her. Finally she just responded, "No" and abruptly crossed the street. As she crossed the street and walked toward her destination, towards a darker and more desolate area, the man who was questioning her backed off and got into his car. I continued walking and had about five more blocks ahead of me. Two blocks later, I noticed a man loitering alone in the shadows by a stop sign. Following my instincts, I began to walk in the street where the streetlights were a bit brighter. As I passed by this man, I wondered if he knew I felt isolated and uncomfortable, but I kept walking with a purpose. My parents always taught me to stay alert and look confident. When I reached home I was relieved for myself, but wondered about the young woman I crossed paths with 10 minutes earlier. Did she get home okay?

I began to play back the evening in my mind, the incessant compliments and questions on the train, the aggressive harassment near the train station, the fear I felt passing those empty lots where a man stood in the shadows. The sequence of interactions left me feeling deflated, tears streamed down my face. For a moment I considered moving back home to Providence, RI, where I didn't have to rely on taking public transportation alone at night, where street harassment was less aggressive and constant. It should not be a routine experience, but for women, girls, LGBT folks and non-gender conforming people, gender based street harassment is a daily experience. I am here today to urge our city officials to take this issue seriously and respond to this problem proactively. Please support HollaBack Philly's city-wide safety audit project so that we can gather data that will inform policies and action to make our public spaces safer. Additionally, I am here to urge city officials to support public awareness campaigns, such as HollaBack's PSA ads that ran on SEPTA this past spring. We need more educational efforts like these to raise awareness and provoke meaningful public discourse around this issue.

I love so many things about the city of Philadelphia and I know that we can do better to make public spaces safer for women, girls and the LGBT community. Let us begin this work together, now.