

Victims rights advocate tells it like it is

By Cynthia Rush
Staff Writer

Marla Hanson ambles on stage with the easy confidence of someone who does not take herself too seriously. Hanson, a fragile, almost childlike looking young woman, appears slightly ruffled, as if she might have just awakened from a nap taken on a folded blanket: pinkish creases stretch across each cheek. Her casual smile makes her appear unconcerned about such details.

Hanson is the nationally-known model, now 26, whose face was slashed in New York in June 1986 (about a week after her 25th birthday) by hired attackers following a dispute with her landlord over an \$850 security deposit. Born in Missouri, she had lived in New York for a year and was earning up to \$2,500 modeling for *Glamour* magazine and for the J.C. Penney Company at the time of her attack.

Her message, she said Tuesday at Sinclair Community College, is, "Don't blame the victim — if you do, you accept the crime." The "Blame-the-Victim Syndrome" suggests that something the victim does "invites a razor attack to your face," Hanson said. People who say, "Why did you go to the bar in the first place?" — that's what she objects to.

"We have more respect for the law than we do for the reason we created it," she said.

THE FORMER model was appointed by President Reagan to chair the National Victims Rights Committee and to give recommendations to a committee studying victims rights. Nation-

OK," she said.

The rapid movement of one of the men's hands in front of her face, while the other held her, left a stinging sensation. Only later, when they released her and she touched her face, did she realize he'd used a razor and left her face torn and bleeding.

In court, she was accused of being racist for having made the assumption of likely rape. "Did anyone say they were going to rape you?" she was asked.

"You were wearing light clothing that night, weren't you, Miss Hanson?" the lawyer asked her. "There was not too much on the lower half of your body... A mini skirt is what you wore," she tells audiences, using a mocking tone in her rendition of the lawyer's question. He then asked her, "Were you wearing panties?"

Her character was continually under fire, she said. Because she once had been friendly enough with Roth to have put a tub of his laundry into the washer, the defense attorney pointedly asked her if she had ever washed Roth's underwear. That incident became "a lurid sexual affair," according to Hanson.

SHE TOLD the Sinclair audience how the lawyer and finally the judge insisted that she formulate a definition of the four-letter vulgarity she was called by Roth. The crowd responded with shocked silence.

"I thought I was losing my mind," Hanson said. "I thought, 'Does this have anything to do with the attack?'... It was humiliating for me to continually be asked if I was wearing panties."

The model said she was repeatedly asked to

al Victims Rights Week is April 17-24. She spoke at Sinclair as part of the Women's Awareness Week activities and is giving her support to a Victims Bill of Rights which would establish certain courtroom procedures to protect victims.

Her 1986-1987 court experience, she later said, was meant to "hurt and destroy" her. When her landlord Steve Roth was on trial, two people were on trial, according to Hanson — Roth and Marla Hanson.

Roth was tried for hiring the two attackers whose slashing of Hanson's face required 185 stitches, including five layers of stitches, to repair. He and the attackers — during a year and a half of trials in which Hanson participated — were later convicted and sent to jail for five to 15 years.

But Roth's trial was referred to as "the Marla Hanson trial," and she believes her character, tried in the media and the courtroom, was in question throughout the proceedings. At the same time, she and the prosecuting attorney were under gag order by the judge. "What did you do to make that man attack you?" was the spoken and unspoken question, Hanson says.

The defense lawyer reportedly began one trial saying that Hanson had a lot of "racial hangups and was after every man in New York City who had a woman... Before the end of this trial I'll have Marla Hanson behind bars," he said.

ON THE NIGHT of the attack, when the two men, who were black, moved in on Roth and Hanson, their words, "This is a stick up," made her believe she was about to be raped. "I kept thinking that if I stayed on my feet I would be

speculate why Roth, whose invitation for a date was turned down, would have wanted to cause her such pain. The irrelevant issue of sex was continually brought up because the two are of different genders, Hanson said.

CURRENT COURTROOM procedures offer defendants legal counsel, according to Hanson. Victims, like herself, are merely witnesses for the prosecution and have no lawyer whose job would be to object to a line of questioning in the client's behalf. The hearing was conducted like a trial but there was no jury.

Meanwhile, the police "grilled (her)" for hours getting information which she believed was "privileged." Even the press had access to those answers, which included discussions of bills and "skeletons in the closet," she said. That procedure is another she hopes will be changed. Hanson, as the victim, was never read her rights as defendants are.

Other procedures she hopes will be reformed as a result of her recommendations include the common procedure of throwing out evidence found as a result of incorrect procedures. Because Hanson's attackers gave their confessions while handcuffed, those were not used in the trial. That system "punishes the victim and cripples the jury," according to Hanson.

Although her former roommates nor her family (who were far away) were not part of her emotional support system during her year-and-a-half long ordeal, "I got moral support from wonderful strangers," she said. "Everyday when I had a weak moment, someone (I didn't know) on the street would say,— and, at this, she gave the thumbs up sign — "Yay Marla!"