
The End of Innocence

Westcott Community Center exhibit chronicles sexual abuse of teens

By Lisa Denice Wortman

A teen-age survivor of sexual abuse asks, "Do you know what it's like to grow up too fast?/ To have different feelings because of your past?/ Once so innocent, so young/ Then in the beat of your heart your childhood's done/ Deprived of all the memories you shared with friends/ Wishing your life would just come to an end/ Do you know what it's like to have life taken away?/ Then have to hold it inside because you're dead if you say/ Do you know what it's like to go day by day?/ To survive on each breath and slowly drift away?"

The words frame a work of art as they wrap in on one another, bending to fit the edges of the page and encircling the final word "AWAY." They frame the creation of an adolescent participating in a Vera House program. The teen participants, ranging in age from 14 to 17, convened for a workshop in creative healing with therapy facilitator Heidi Kuhl. Most had recently completed a 10-week group therapy program, while others were new to the group. All participants held two things in common: They were teens, and they were survivors of sexual assault and abuse.

Each young survivor created three pieces of art in the 3 1/2-hour evening session. The work was then photographed and made into digital poster images so the teens could take the originals home and so reprints could be made for sale to the public. Together, the posters form *Teen Survivors' Art Exhibit*, which opened June 16 at the Westcott Community Center.

Crystal Collette, a therapist for the teens, speaks for the anonymous artists. She emphasizes that the creative healing session with Kuhl allowed the young survivors to access different parts of themselves, parts they could not reach through words alone. "Heidi led them through this creative process," Collette says, "helping them access their stories."

A second therapist, Tatiana Diaz, worked closely with the adolescents and explains that creative therapy "allows them to express pain in a different environment, using a very powerful vehicle to understand what's happening inside themselves, and what's happening inside one another." The pieces were "not only about understanding personal pain, but seeing others' pain, also."

Alongside "Do you know what it's like?" works on display include "From Tears," where a tree thrives on water absorbed from a weeping eye. In "My Heart," a heart has turned green, its edges blurred and indecipherable. "This is How I Feel" depicts a heart removed from the body, the abandoned face left behind, bearing a mixed expression of distrust and anger. Some works on display suggest healing, such as "Breathe," "Shooting Star," "Sunrise" and "Healing Orb." "We are Free" presents a tiny human figure, mouth agape and surrounded by liberating screams that shoot to the edges of the page: "FREE!"

Steve Susman, director of the Westcott Community Center, explains that the center has maintained a working relationship with Vera House, which provides shelter and support services to battered women and children. "This is our way of supporting {Vera House's} mission, to help support a vital community service. This is consciousness-raising for the public; let's not forget about it. Let's not sweep it under the carpet. These issues are vital to the health of our community, and our city, and people need to be aware. Anything we can do to address it, to stop it, and to bring it to people's consciousness."

Teen Survivors' Art Exhibit runs through July 3 at the Westcott Community Center, 826 Euclid Ave. Take the elevator to the second floor's gallery, open Mondays through Fridays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free, with 100 percent of the proceeds from artwork sales benefiting Vera House programs. For more information, call 478-8634.