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Victims of sexual assault take heart

Program provides outlet for their emotions as they try to resume daily lives

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BY BETH MILLER
THE NEWS JOURNAL
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Some of the artists couldn't bear to sign their work or explain anything about it. "P" could disclose only one initial. And Rebecca used just her first name in the wooden heart she titled "Forgiveness."

The artists didn't attend the opening of their exhibit Tuesday night at Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, either -- the first "Healing the Wounded Heart" exhibit done by sexual-assault survivors and advocates for them.

But pieces of their stories are out there now, captured with various symbols and textures and colors on 54 wooden hearts. The exhibit, which is open to the public for three days next week, is part of Project Illumination Delaware, an effort by The Arc of Delaware to expand its services to people with developmental disabilities who have become crime victims.

The artists ranged in age from 5 to 63 years old, said Deanna Pedicone of The Arc of Delaware. About a third of them have some kind of disability, she said. Some are assault survivors, some are relatives and advocates. All have seen the horrific impact of sexual assault.

Those with disabilities are five times more likely to be victimized, said Katt Rivera, program director of Contact Delaware's Rape Crisis Services in New Castle County.

"People do not believe this can happen. They don't want to think this happens to them," Rivera said. "And who is going to believe the bipolar girl or the schizophrenic girl who hears voices in her head or the girl with Down syndrome?"

Most often -- 85 percent to 90 percent of the time -- the offender is known by the victim, Rivera said.

Many times, the crime victim cannot explain what has happened, making prosecution of the crime more complicated but not impossible, said Attorney General Carl C. Danberg, who attended the exhibit opening Tuesday night.

"A disability can make the victim a poor witness for the state -- and that may be exactly the reason that person was selected for victimization," Danberg said. "But you can't give up. You have to find a way to work through those issues."

"We're encouraged," said Rita Marocco, executive director of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Delaware. "Law enforcement has become much more sophisticated and willing to collaborate with the disabilities community and I believe the rest of the criminal justice system is, too. We're making strides."

Danberg said he was struck by the wide range of ages and relationships described by some of the artists.

One was sexually abused by a parent when she was 10



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THE NEWS JOURNAL/WILLIAM BRETZGER

Tonya Bayard of Wilmington and her son Andrew, 3, admire wood hearts Tuesday made by survivors of sexual assault and their supporters. The exhibit was part of Project Illumination Delaware at Howard High School of Technology.



"Broken Tears" is one of 54 decorated wood hearts on display at the Wilmington school.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Healing the Wounded Heart, a sexual-assault survivor art exhibit by Project Illumination Delaware, a collaboration of the Center for Disabilities Studies, The Arc of Delaware, Contact Delaware and NAMI Delaware

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 18 to 20

WHERE: Howard High School of Technology, 401 E. 12th St., Wilmington

HOW TO HELP

Michele Warch, a family-crisis therapist supervisor for the state Division of Family Services, offered these recommendations to anyone who learns that another person has been sexually assaulted:

- Assume the person is telling the truth.
- Relieve the situation however you're able. Do not return the person to the alleged perpetrator.
- Report the assault to the police or other appropriate agency.
- For more assistance, call the Division of Family Services at (800) 292-9582 or Adult Protective Services at (800) 223-9074.

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years old, one was abused by a brother when she was 8, another woman was assaulted by a stranger when she was 28. The Rainbow Support Group of women with developmental disabilities made a group heart to express their unity in recovery. And one heart titled "Stop Yelling" had no other explanation but the tears

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and the word "depression" on it.

One said "I stayed stoned to cope" after abuse by her uncle. But the heart had a hopeful message, too: "Treatment works."

One heart bore the continuing anguish of a woman assaulted by a stranger when she was 21. She wrote about "fear, suspicion, self-hatred." The heart carried tears, and the explanation that "the tears fall mourning everything that was and may have been" for herself and her children.

Tracy Mann of the Center for Disabilities Studies at the University of Delaware said one artist told her creating the heart was so therapeutic that she didn't want to let it go for the exhibit, which will also be displayed on April 26 at the Modern Maturity Center in Dover.

Census 2000 figures show that more than 144,000 Delaware residents -- about 18 percent -- have a disability. But an accurate picture of the incidence of sexual assault and other crimes against people with disabilities is not known.

Nationally, the problem of sexual assault is "greatly underestimated," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. The center reported rates of sexual violence against adults with cognitive disabilities ranging from 25 percent to 67 percent. Among women with disabilities, the range is even worse -- 51 percent to 79 percent.

"We know that people that have disabilities are at a higher risk for all kinds of abuse, not just sexual assault," said Michele Warch, family crisis therapist supervisor for the state Division of Family Services treatment unit in Seaford.

Warch said the presence of a disability can intensify feelings of guilt in a victim, who may feel guilty for not being able to offer adequate defense or recognize what was happening.

Warch said she hopes the exhibit raises awareness of the problem -- and also promotes the healing of the survivors who participated.

Contact Beth Miller at 324-2784 or bmiller@delawareonline.com.

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