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Woman, group mark 20 years of helping sex victims heal

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Amid the snug couches and stuffed animals in an otherwise homely office resides a sinister piece of furniture: a black throne-like chair with nails jutting out of the arms and rusted barbed wire twisted across the backrest and seat. Strings of hot glue cling to the spikes like cobwebs, and red candle wax spots the shards of a broken mirror scattered across the chair.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Amy Pine is one of the recipients of the 'Be the Difference Awards,' a testament to two decades of work with child-abuse victims at the Survivors Healing Center

But beneath the ominous surface are symbols of beauty -- dried flowers, seashells, butterfly wings.

The work is the manifestation of one woman's coping with her childhood plagued by sexual abuse. It is a piece of art that she created as part of her healing process.

"It's amazing that children endure and survive what that reality is. It's an amazing tribute to the spirit, the human spirit," said Amy Pine, arms folded as she peered down at the chair made by one of her clients. "It's pretty grim."

Pine is the co-founder of the Survivors Healing Center -- a local nonprofit that provides support and prevention programs for child abuse victims. Pine runs several therapy groups and serves on

the board of directors. She has also helped facilitate the Art of Healing program through the center, where adult survivors use painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry and other mediums to confront the horrors of their pasts.

The chair was among the dozens of pieces featured in this year's Art of Healing exhibit, which included opportunity for the creators to speak publicly about their pieces.

"It is a way of taking something that was so destructive in one's life and shining a light of creativity on it," Pine said. "It's a huge thing to step up there and have 200 people as a witness and say, 'This is what happened to me and I am not keeping the secret.' It's very empowering."

Pine received a "Be The Difference Award" last month from the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz. The recognition comes the same year that the Survivors Healing Center celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Pine hopes the award will bring more attention to the greatly understated issue.

"Childhood sexual abuse is such a silent and invisible problem," she said. "A client said to me this morning, 'When are people going to really start to take the issue of childhood sexual abuse seriously and really see the damages and the consequences?'"

She continued, "The frustration is that -- for all of us, clients and therapists -- it's very challenging to bring the issue up in the public's awareness and have it stay there."

Santa Cruz, however, strikes Pine as more promising than most places.

Pine, who moved to Santa Cruz in 1974, envisions the city as the center of a larger movement to stop child sexual abuse.

"We can start here," she said. "Let's be a model community. We can share and teach other communities about how to create their own Survivors Healing Centers."

Since its founding, the Survivors Healing Center has grown to offer an array of therapy groups to cater to a diverse clientele, including sessions for adult women, men, Latina women, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women and men. The center has also begun to offer therapy groups for teenage girls and has plans to add a group for teenage boys -- a demographic which Pine says abuse is especially stigmatized.

Pine, who runs the Latina group in Watsonville, says there are challenges unique to each group.

"We don't want to assign the fact that there's childhood sexual abuse in a Latino community because it is a Latino community, because there's childhood sexual abuse in every community," Pine said. "So, that's tricky because they don't want to betray their culture in order to do their own healing. It's hard to break the silence there."

The Survivors Healing Center is located at 2301 Mission St., Suite C-1 in Santa Cruz. It is open to the public Monday-Friday. For information, call 423-7601 or visit survivorshealingcenter.org.

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