

Advocates hope to raise awareness of child sexual abuse with walk

By DANIEL LOPEZ

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A 22-year-old Watsonville man was arraigned Wednesday on charges he **SANTA** sexually assaulted two teenage **CRUZ** girls he met at a party over the weekend.

His arrest comes just days before the community is set to hold an event to raise awareness of child sex abuse.

Jesus Roslho Hernandez Romo pleaded innocent to four counts of child molestation and two counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. He is scheduled to return to court June 4.

Romo's arrest Monday came days before the "Walk to Stop the Silence," an event aimed at raising awareness of childhood sexual abuse, scheduled to wind through downtown Watsonville on Saturday.

Survivors Healing Center of Santa Cruz, a nonprofit organization helping those sexually abused as children, planned the walk. Maria Rodriguez-Cas-

tillo, executive director of the healing center, said sexual abuse of children is far too common.

"It happens daily and it's all over the world," she said. "It's a silent epidemic and we don't talk about it. We can't stay quiet and we need to speak up."

Detective Monica Herrera, who handles the bulk of sexual assault cases investigated by the Watsonville Police Department, is among the featured speakers at a forum in the City Plaza after the walk.

Herrera, who has worked sex crimes for three years, said the department averaged 30 to 40 reports of sex crimes against children in the past year. But that number probably doesn't reflect what's actually taking place in the community because many incidents go unreported.

"The kids think it's their fault or they feel ashamed," Herrera said. "It's very underreported unfortunately."

She said children are often threatened to keep quiet or are just fearful of coming forward.

Police usually learn about children

If You Go

WHAT: Walk to Stop the Silence.

WHERE: St. Patrick's Church and head south on Main Street to City Plaza.

WHEN: 11 a.m. walk begins. Community forum at the plaza immediately following until 2 p.m.

INFORMATION: Survivors Healing Center at 423-7601.

being sexually abused when the victims confide in trusting adults who then inform police, Herrera said.

She said doctors, counselors and teachers are required to report such cases to law enforcement. But sometimes years pass before victims come forward.

"The only way cases are made is if victims come forward," she said. "When one person comes forward because of that one courageous person other victims come forward."

Rodriguez-Castillo said she hopes more parents can become educated about the sexual abuse of children.

"We seem to educate our children to stay away from strangers and most of the child sexual abuse that happens is done by someone known to the child," Rodriguez-Castillo said.

Herrera said often the cases involve close relatives, other than biological parents, or family friends. She said parents should be less trusting and that lack of parental supervision sometimes leads to these cases.

"They have access to these kids," Herrera said. "They are not going to do it in a public place."

Police said Romo, the man arrested Monday, met the two 13-year-old girls he is accused of assaulting at a party Saturday night and offered them a ride home.

After the party, police said the group went to a local motel where Romo assaulted the girls when the other man had left.

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