



# Survivors Healing Center to hold 14th annual Art of Healing show

## Event coincides with organization's 20th anniversary

By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

The Survivors Healing Center sits on a bustling section of Mission Street, where a steady stream of commuters rushes by, intent only on getting to and from work.

The nondescript building is easy to miss — the only hint of the work that goes on within is a small sign with the organization's name.

Inside, an open, sunny ther-

apy room is filled with soft sofas and chairs. The walls bear dozens of works of art by survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

"We're small, but what happens here is really big," said Maria Rodriguez, executive director of the center.

In November, the center will celebrate two decades of providing therapy for survivors of sexual abuse, as well as training and education for therapists

and other professionals who work with survivors.

As part of its 20th anniversary celebration, the center will hold its 14th annual Art of Healing show on Nov. 3. The exhibition will feature artwork ranging from paintings to performances of poetry.

Jeanette Cooper, who was sexually abused as a child, said she's always turned to art to

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process the events in her life. When as a child she encountered something that disturbed her, she turned to her pencils and sketchpad.

"It was interesting — it was how I processed it," she said.

Even with this outlet, however, Cooper said she never used it to process her abuse, until panic attacks compelled her to join a therapy group.

"Through art, I saw connections and was able to move forward," she said.

Cooper experimented with whatever art medium she found — embroidery, beadwork, writing, chalk, poetry and paint.

Most recently, she painted "Me and myself," a brightly colored self-portrait of herself as a child, being held by herself as an adult.

"It was almost divine," said Cooper, of her discovery of art as therapy. "It's another dimension to express deep emotion — to somehow make sense of it. After doing the painting, I was able to get that connection that I could get better and I was deserving of love, and I could be a whole human being."

Many survivors suppress their abuse, hoping it doesn't come up, said Rodriguez.

"But it does," said Rodriguez. "Survivors need to make connections."

But making these connections is difficult, because there's

often a great deal of shame around the issue, she said.

The center began to combine art and therapy when organizers realized it was an ideal way for normally reluctant victims to express themselves, said Rodriguez.

"It's a big piece of the therapy we do here," she said.

Rodriguez estimates there are only a handful of similar services throughout the world. As a result, the Survivors Healing Center gets calls from as far away as England and Germany. Often, the callers are simply looking for someone to listen, or for someone who believes their stories, said Rodriguez.

"To recognize that it happened, I can turn my scars into monuments and say 'I'm whole, and I'm here, and I'm going to take care of myself now,'" said Cooper. "There's great power to recognize that."

The Survivors Healing Center helps hundreds of people every year. Organizers oversee therapy groups for women; men, lesbians, Latinos and teen girls. The groups typically meet for 12 weeks. The nonprofit organization has an office in Santa Cruz and in Watsonville.

For information, visit [www.survivorshalingcenter.org](http://www.survivorshalingcenter.org), call 423-7601 or e-mail [info@survivorshalingcenter.org](mailto:info@survivorshalingcenter.org).

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*Through Dec. 31, any donations received will be matched by a grant from private donors. Donations may be sent to 2301 Mission Street, Suite C-1, Santa Cruz, CA 95060*

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