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Art and Healing

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Survivors Healing Center taps into hope through art A year and a half ago Brian (last name withheld) received a letter from his older brother. The 49-year-old Santa Cruzan had a sense that something tragic was coming. For some time, they'd been talking about their dysfunctional family and the emotional abuses they'd endured from their father while growing up. Brian's brother had recently taken a train ride to his childhood home in Colorado, on a quest for answers to painful questions. As Brian settled into the chair where he often prays, in his peaceful home, he opened the letter. And within minutes his quiet life began to crumble around him, like someone knocking down a giant erector set. The letter explained that Brian's brother had come to realize that their father had sexually abused him. And in that instant Brian realized this tragic story wasn't just his brother's, it was also his own horrific tale.

"It was kind of like waking up slowly," Brian says, 18 months later. "And as I was waking up slowly I felt my genital areas burning. ... Fear, discomfort, was located there. I walked out and sat on my stairs outside going, 'Oh my God, I'm a victim too. My father did this to me too.'"

Fortunately Brian was already in therapy, working through issues and confronting his bipolar disorder. At his next counseling session, this new information emerged. The therapist "took a very professional and careful approach with me," Brian says. "He understood that my heart and soul were guiding me and he said the soul would give me a clearer memory when my soul knew I was ready."

At first the memories were emotional and physical, like when he read his brother's letter. But as time progressed, more vivid memories began to surface: repeated experiences of fondling, fellatio and sodomy.

"What was particularly significant was that I actually recognized my father's genitals," Brian says. "You at first go through stages of doubt," he explains of the remembering process, but then the memories come like one brick on top of another.

Brian was 49 when he discovered that he had been a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Now, he's a survivor. But he hasn't only survived, he's been in

the process of healing from the dreadful discovery. His wife, his brother, his spiritual path, his therapist and the Survivor's Healing Center (SHC) in Santa Cruz were the five things that he needed to survive and heal.

About a year ago, Brian's therapist recommended he get involved with SHC. He took the suggestion and began to move forward, being involved with, for a time, a men's survivors support group. The group is currently defunct, but he hopes to see it revive.

In the meantime, he will be involved with SHC's 12th Annual Art of Healing Event from 7 to 10 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 4, at the Pacific Cultural Center. Survivors will offer up poetry, dance, musical numbers and visual arts. Two days later, from 3 to 6 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 6, there will be an artists' reception at the UC Santa Cruz Women's Center where survivors will have display their work through Dec. 3.

Brian will read a poem that he has written as he enters his first experience with the Art of Healing. "I wanted to be a part of a larger healing community," he says. "I've wanted to need that sense of community, but just as important to me is that I want to support other men and women."

About 30 artists will participate in this year's event, which is expected to draw a large crowd, with entrance to the event on a sliding scale of \$5 to \$20. The event got its start 12 years ago when Amy Pine, co-founder of SHC, wanted to show support to survivors by exploring how art had helped them in finding a voice and discovering healing.

"Child abuse is such a pervasive issue in our culture," says SHC director Nidhi Chanani. She suggests people visit the Art of Healing to "see that it is an issue and see the beautiful collection of people who are engaging in the process to heal through the pain they suffered. It's a really powerful and intense event and it takes an issue that's difficult to hear about and talk about and flips it from this weighty, difficult thing into something that has a lot of hope."

Current statistics provided by the Survivors Healing Center cite that one in three females and one in six males will be sexually abused by the time they are 18. The statistics are staggering, and it's not uncommon for victims to realize later in life that they were sexually abused as children. And although going from the place of being a victim to being a survivor may feel like a gnarly and treacherous journey, it doesn't need to be done alone. "Reach out,

get help, [it will change your life], no question about it,” Brian says. “Talk to someone safe and one of the best places to start is the Survivors Healing Center.”

For more information about the Survivors Healing Center, call 423-7601. The Art of Healing will feature music, poetry, dance and visual arts from 7 to 10 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 4, at the Pacific Cultural Center at 1307 Seabright Ave., Santa Cruz. A reception for the visual artists is from 3 to 6 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 6, at the UC Santa Cruz Women’s Center. The artwork will be on display through Dec. 3.