Clothesline Project sheds light on domestic violence in the community

DAVID PACE dpace@postregister.com Oct 18, 2023


The Clothesline Project is raising community awareness of domestic violence and intimate partner violence in Idaho Falls.

The exhibit includes more than 75 T-shirts designed by individuals who have experienced sexual assault or designed by family members, friends and loved ones supporting someone who has gone through that trauma.

Guests can witness the impact and messages victims shared from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday at the Bennion Student Union Multipurpose Room at University Place.

“All of the shirts have been made in southeast Idaho,” said Blaney Hanvey, Idaho State University—Idaho Falls counseling coordinator, who spearheaded the exhibit. “A lot of times people will say, ‘We don’t have a problem here. We don’t have domestic violence or sexual assault here.’ But these shirts tell a different story.”
At a luncheon Wednesday, former College of Eastern Idaho student Melissa Sudweeks performed “Stronger,” an original song sharing part of her journey overcoming the trauma of abuse. “For a really long time, I could never speak about my abuse,” she said. “I would never verbalize it, and for a really long time that made it a lot harder to overcome. Throughout the years, I have been able to find my voice, and that has been so empowering. … Even then it is still really hard to share our stories.”

A couple of years ago, she composed the song which she performed with her guitar at the luncheon.

“Finding all of my strength to stand again, this is a battle I will win.
I am Stronger than you’ll ever know
I am braver than I’ll ever show.
Underneath it all I still believe
That I’m Stronger than I seem.”

The song’s message is that “even though we go through these things, we’re strong regardless,” she said. A variety of community partners including Bonneville County Sheriff’s Office Investigations Lt. Karl Noah, Bonneville County Prosecuting Attorney Randy Neal, the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Center’s Forensic Nurse Examiner Program Director Amanda Cook and Idaho State University Assistant Vice President for Access and Opportunity Sari Byerly also presented on their contributions to combat domestic violence and sexual abuse in the community.
Julie Thompson, a counselor at CEI’s Center of New Directions, honored the memory of Destiny Joy Thain, a former CEI student who was studying to be a paralegal. Thain experienced many challenges including abuse and homelessness. She had planned to speak at the luncheon Wednesday but died in a car accident this spring.

“I only saw her cry once,” Thompson said. “… She kept returning to school. She kept fighting, and I have not doubt that if we had not lost her this spring, she would have been destined to have the most powerful and positive impact on her community and on other people. Today I have no doubt, she would have moved everyone in this room to tears with her courage and her tenacity and her ability to make others feel hopeful.”

The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Center in Idaho Falls sees about 1,000 victims each year, Executive Director Teena McBride said. Last year, 357 were victims of domestic violence, 330 were child abuse victims and the remainder were adult sexual assault and elder abuse victims. More than one in three women worldwide has experienced domestic or intimate partner violence or sexual abuse. Only about one-third of crimes reported end up in the court system, McBride said. The shirts share a startling and personal reality of those who have endured incidents of violence and intrusion.

“They get to represent their story however they want,” Hanvey said. “… I love it too because we get to see the different stages of healing. It doesn’t necessarily matter based on time but where somebody is at in their healing process. Sometimes it is that anger and that’s what comes out, and sometimes it is more of that hope, the moving forward in the goals that they have for making their lives different and their children’s’ lives different than what they have experienced.”
The exhibit is cosponsored by the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Center, University of Idaho, College of Eastern Idaho and Idaho State University.

At 6 p.m. Thursday, a “Take Back the Night” march will start at the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Center on 1050 Memorial Drive and proceed around the River Walk to raise awareness and support individuals who have experienced intimate partner violence or sexual assault. “The purpose of the project is to shed light on a dark reality often hidden within our communities,” McBride said in a press release. “By amplifying the voices of survivors, we can bring the truth into the light, enabling us to confront and address the underlying forces that perpetuate this destructive epidemic, all while honoring the strength and resilience of those who bravely share their stories.”