

The Clothesline Project: Finding a Voice

Northland Family Help Center's Community Education Program uses many tools to promote community awareness of the issues involved with domestic and sexual violence. One medium that consistently compels audiences with the personal stories of community members is the Flagstaff Clothesline Project.

The Clothesline Project, using the traditionally feminine symbol of a clothesline, solidifies what is common in women's experience with violence— by stringing together their voices it reclaims a traditional symbol of women's conversational space. The clothesline is a site which often bridged the isolation of households, serving as a primary place where women gathered and shared their stories with one another. The Clothesline Project is a voice for women who may not otherwise find the space to communicate their story with violence. On the Clothesline, their story is hung for all to see and provides a way of airing society's dirty laundry— and the stories of women and children.

The Cape Cod Women's Agenda was motivated by personal experiences and other women's stories of relationship violence to develop a program that would concentrate on the issue of violence against women and children. A visual artist conceived of the idea of using shirts—hung on a clothesline—as a vehicle for raising awareness. The Clothesline project thus became a tribute to women who have suffered from acts of violence committed against them. It is similar to the AIDS Quilt in the power of the display and the emotion it invokes. The purpose of the project is four-fold:

- To bear witness to the survivors as well as the victims of violence
- To help with the healing process for people who have lost a loved one or are survivors of violence
- To educate, document and raise awareness of this problem
- To provide a nationwide support network for survivors, victims, and witnesses of abuse Each shirt hanging on the line reflects a personal experience and each color of the shirts represents a different violent act: White for victims who have died as a result of domestic violence

Yellow/Beige for those who have been emotional and physically battered and assaulted

Red/Pink/Orange for those who have been raped or sexually assaulted

Blue/Green for survivors of incest

Purple/Lavender for those attacked because of their sexual orientation

Since its inception in 1990, many people have been touched by the stories expressed through the project. There are over 250 different Clotheslines in communities throughout the United States and the world. The willingness of these people to share their stories plays a key role in their personal healing process and, ultimately, to ending the cycle of violence. No longer are victims of violence a statistic, but through the display we see that these crimes happen to a person: our mothers, sisters, brothers, and friends.

Although the issues around domestic and sexual violence are difficult to discuss and are often very sad, we hope that the Clothesline Project contributes to the celebration of the strength to endure and provides an powerful venue for survivors of violence to break the silence.

The Flagstaff Clothesline Project is placed on display throughout the year at different venues in the community. Please contact Northland Family Help Center for more information about the next display or with any questions.

Sources:

<http://www.now.org/issues/violence/clothes.html>

<http://www.clothesline.org/>

NFHC archives