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'What Were You Wearing' exhibit comes to PT



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Above: The art installation, "What Were You Wearing," will feature clothes and stories submitted by sexual assault survivors here in Jefferson County. One part of the installation will feature this painting, which tells the story of one survivor who was assaulted at work. Leader photo by Lily Haight

LEADER PHOTO BY LILY HAIGHT

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Lily Haight

haight@ptleader.com (mailto:lhaight@ptleader.com)

In the early 2000s, Mary Simmerling wrote a poem that inspired a movement.

Her poem, titled "What I was Wearing," detailed the exact outfit she wore the day she was sexually assaulted.

The lyrical poetry describing such a haunting event had a national impact, went viral, and became a kind of anthem in the fight against what is known as "victim blaming."

In 2013, after a few professors from the University of Kansas heard the poem at a conference hosted by the Arkansas Coalition Against Sexual Assault, they decided to do an art installation called "What Were You Wearing."

Now, similar installations are being staged all around the country, at universities, art institutes and in communities like ours.

This year, Dove House Advocacy Services will be holding a "What Were You Wearing" installation from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on April 13 at the Cotton Building in Port Townsend.

The installation will feature stories from sexual assault survivors, collected by Dove House advocates. Paired with the story will be the clothes that the person was wearing when they were assaulted.

The point of the exhibit is to address the issue of victim blaming, which often happens to victims of sexual assault, said Teresa Shiraishi, a therapist at Dove House Advocacy Services

"One layer of trauma from sexual assault is the actual violence," Shiraishi said. "Another layer is how friends, family and the world respond to you."

When victims of sexual assault share their story, the question of "what were you wearing?" is often asked, she said. This pushes the blame onto the victim, as if their choice of clothing caused the person to assault them.

The exhibit features clothing of all kinds, including a prom dress, a swimsuit, a shirt and pants, making the point that the kind of clothing someone wears does not make them more vulnerable to sexual assault. Instead, it is more about power and control, Shiraishi said.

"It feels important to break the silence around sexual violence," said a survivor who is submitting a story and clothing to the exhibit, but was granted anonymity to protect her from further trauma. "In my experience, it happened in a work setting. And then, something similar happened to two other coworkers. In that situation, it became clear how silence can perpetuate some of these issues."

It took time and healing to be able to submit her story, she said. Doing so too close to the actual assault would have been more difficult, but after time passed it felt like a "healing thing to do."

Part of the reason Dove House decided to hold "What Were You Wearing" installation was to highlight Sexual Assault Awareness Month, which is April. The designation is to raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault in our society, Shiraishi said.

"For this month, Dove House wanted to honor survivors' stories."

The art installation will be open for viewing all day, with a performance from the Poetic Justice Playback Theater ensemble taking place in the afternoon.

There will be spaces set aside for quiet, mindful coloring, Shiraishi said, and therapists from Dove House available.

Viewing the exhibit itself won't be easy, but it is important, she said.

"It is a good way to challenge yourself to learn about these issues that are really pervasive in our society," she said. "It's going to take all of us working together to end it."

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226 Adams Street
Port Townsend, WA 98368
1-360-385-2900 (tel:1-360-385-2900)

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