

“The Power of Speaking and Being Heard”

Submitted by the staff of SAFE San Juans

“I was afraid” - three words that are usually whispered the first time someone tries to explain why they didn’t fight back when being sexually assaulted. “People will say it’s my fault, that I wanted it, or that it didn’t really happen” - three explanations we often hear for why people are slow to speak up after being sexually abused. “I am hurt and need help” - powerful words typically spoken softly by someone who feels deep shame or is fearful of further injury. It takes great courage to speak after being sexually assaulted, yet speaking can be healing. Speaking can take a survivor of sexual abuse (or domestic violence) out of the place of feeling powerless and allow them to live in the truth they have experienced. Words restore a voice that someone tried to silence, and we should always listen.

Sexual abuse is never about love or intimacy even though it invades the most personal of spaces. Instead, power and the desire to control is at the root of sexual abuse. It makes no difference if it happens in the context of marriage or intimate partners, the vulnerable working space of employer/employee, or a thousand other settings. The effect of sexual abuse is to make the victim feel the absence of personal power. It makes the victim feel weak and less valued as a person. Powerlessness is a profound feeling. It creeps into every aspect of life, damaging the soul and all that a person wants to believe is true of them. Many people who have been abused live in fear of telling their story, believing that no one will believe them... or they will be blamed for the suffering they experienced.

When the staff at SAFE San Juans serve someone who has been sexually abused, it’s not easy for us to set aside our desire for justice. But we know that justice is not a prerequisite for someone to feel like a whole person - being able to speak is. Sometimes words come out in a whisper - “I have been hurt”. The thinnest sliver of personal strength becomes a pillar as the abused person speaks and their story is not dismissed. Words may not bring justice, but they can bring personal wholeness, especially when they are heard and believed.

While whispers can transform broken people, whispers can also be harmful. It’s not unusual for people to ask a staff member of SAFE San Juans if they are aware of abuse being suffered by someone in our community. Our standard line is “we can neither confirm nor deny.” In other words, we don’t have the right to talk about it. We deny ourselves the opportunity to tell someone’s story so they retain the right to decide what is and is not known about them. If you want a place where you can process the trauma of being sexually abused or of experiencing domestic violence, SAFE San Juans wants to listen. SAFE San Juans is the Community Sexual Assault Program supporting survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse in San Juan County.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The staff of SAFE San Juans are providing newspaper articles to highlight important issues related to this topic. For information about SAFE San Juans call 360-378-8680 or visit one of our offices in Eastsound, Friday Harbor, or Lopez Village. If you are in a domestic violence or sexual assault crisis and need immediate help, please call our 24-hour crisis line at 360-378-2345.