

Santa Cruz Good Times

Survivors Healing Center

A former survivor of childhood sexual abuse encourages other survivors to seek help | by Christa Martin

The abuse began when she was 2 and a half: physical, sexual and ritualistic. It came by way of her father, his friends, her uncle, a step-grandfather and others. Every piece of the little girl's life was torn apart. It's a miracle she survived to be a functional 39-year-old. Now, there's nary a visual hint that she endured such trauma. Sitting in the Survivors Healing Center in Santa Cruz, Cowles is perky and exudes confidence. The center deserves an enormous amount of credit for this, as does the nearly 15 years of counseling Cowles has received. She is just one of an astonishing number of victims. Most importantly, she is a survivor.

Surviving such an ordeal was an arduous process. When Cowles was 11, she was sent to live with her mother and stepfather. (She'd been living with her father at the time.) The ritualistic and sexual abuse ended, and so did most of her childhood memories. She was suicidal, and plagued by nightmares. At 12, she started drinking, which led to partying and then promiscuity. Self-mutilation (cutting herself) began at some point.

It's almost like cancer, Cowles says. I think of the child abuse and the sexual abuse it smothers the spirit and the soul from developing as a whole person. I was afraid all the time.

At 18, her life out of control, Cowles found solace in art. Yet it was this safe place of creative refuge where strange images appeared, things that suggested something had happened to her.

By the time she hit 20, Cowles was experiencing flashbacks and nightmares and started flipping out. I thought I was going crazy. I started falling apart. The self-mutilation got worse.

At that point, Cowles' stepmother directed her toward a therapist. Shortly afterward, she started remembering. At first it was memories of her uncle and then she realized her father had also abused her.

I couldn't even say the word incest, Cowles says. Other things began surfacing. It was horrible in my twenties, she says. I struggled with depression and was in the psych ward many times. Slowly, my art helped me.

During her early thirties, Cowles moved to Santa Cruz and began therapy with Amy Pine, the co-founder of the Survivors Healing Center. Pine, a soft-spoken woman who radiates empathy and compassion, invited Cowles to listen to a guest speaker at the center and Cowles agreed to the visit. Soon, Cowles became involved in many of the center's offerings: group therapy, guest speakers, art events and more.

Being around the many survivors helped my shame and the taboo of talking about it, Cowles says. I came here as invisible as I possibly could. I didn't speak up but more and more I found myself getting involved. I went on a retreat and started taking on more and more roles. I got involved in the Art of Healing (an annual art exhibit created by and for survivors).

Now Cowles is the curator for the Art of Healing shows. She's also a local art teacher and a graduate student studying art therapy. Survivors Healing Center has been instrumental in giving Cowles a purpose.

It has helped (with my healing), I really could cry, she says, clearly emotional when talking about the center. You do your healing where you're just in the trenches, figuring out what's going on. Then you realize you can actually have a life. I have something to offer. I have gifts. The shame is crap. (The center) empowered me to start speaking up, have a voice. I got the support here from the community of people, from the director, from the staff. I come hang out here. It's a very welcoming place to try on being more visible and being more authentic and not so scared, and be who you are.

The number of people who've been attacked by childhood sexual abuse is disturbing. Unfortunately, there are many who are trying to survive on their own. That's not necessary; that's why places like the Survivors Healing Center exist to provide a haven for help. Childhood sexual abuse is an epidemic. Pine notes the statistics: one of every three or four women has been sexually abused as a child, and one out of every six or seven men. Santa Cruz County survivors are encouraged to visit or call the center, a small, inconspicuous place on the Westside, or the extension office in Watsonville. At either location, people can attend support groups (for men,

women, teens and Latinas) or go on retreats. The center plans to offer individual counseling in the future. Most services are offered on a sliding scale.

This (childhood sexual abuse) is the terrorism that's going on in our own community, in our back yard, Pine says. I'd like us to help people stop the cycles of violence and make the world a safe place for children to grow up.

For more information, and to contribute to the Survivors Healing Center, call 423-7601 or visit 2301 Mission St., Ste. C-1, Santa Cruz, or 406 Main St., Watsonville, Suites 319 and 320. Contact the Watsonville office at 761-3861. E-mail the center at info@survivorshalingcenter.org. See page 57 for contribution coupon.