

Survivors Speak Out

by Kim Ellis

"I know that every time I accept my past and respect where I am in the present, I am giving myself a future."--*The Courage To Heal*

It's okay to talk about it! That's what I learned at the "Survivors Speak Out" program presented by myself and five other people at CLOSER on February 5. We on the "Survivors Speak Out" committee were greatly moved by all of the support and positive feedback following the program.

Most people commented that a lot of material was succinctly presented in a personal manner, and that they greatly appreciated--and were deeply touched by--what the panel members were doing.

The program was presented in three general parts: background, process of healing, and panel discussion. What follows is an abbreviated version of the program. I want to thank the committee members for the use of their notes in preparing this article.

Background

What is sexual abuse?

Any type of sexual activity

unwillingly experienced by a child or adolescent, male or female. It usually involves an older, more powerful person as the abuser.

Why is sexual abuse wrong?

Sexual abuse violates the right of each person to make important decisions about her or his own body. It hurts the survivor psychologically and/or physically. Effects include low self-esteem, shame, and anger.

Who sexually abuses children?

Someone with serious psychological problems. Most abusers are heterosexual males. Abusers come from every socioeconomic background. Most abusers abuse someone they know.

Whose fault is it?

IT IS NEVER THE FAULT OF THE SURVIVOR. Most survivors assume that they are responsible for the abuse, but even if the survivor did nothing to stop it, abuse is never the fault of the survivor. It is always the responsibility of the adult to act with respect toward the child.

How does sexual abuse happen?

Sexual abuse usually involves subtle force or coercion, bribes or tricks. The abuser uses his/her power and position of authority to exert control over the victim.

Why endure the abuse?

The survivor often keeps silent as a result of feelings of confusion, fear, guilt, shame, and powerlessness. The survivor often depends upon the abuser for

fulfillment of basic needs such as shelter, food, or attention. Some survivors are made to believe that they are responsible for keeping the family together and must endure the abuse to that end. Some survivors report the abuse, are not believed, and are returned to the abusive situation.

The Process of Healing

Decision to heal

Making the decision to heal from sexual abuse means choosing to make your own growth and recovery a priority. It is not the same thing as being aware that you were abused. It is a conscious decision to take responsibility for your own recovery.

Deciding to heal is not an easy decision. The decision usually means giving up life as you know it, a life which is familiar and predictable, however unhealthy or painful it may be.

Remembering the abuse

You forget the abuse in order to survive. Suppressing traumatic memories is a coping mechanism. Life-changes can trigger memories. While some survivors have never forgotten the abuse, they have often forgotten the emotions associated with the abuse.

Some survivors show signs of having been abused without having any specific memories. This situation is normal and is okay. The mind will not let memories out until it is ready. Whether or not you remember, you can heal.

Believing it happened and matters

Traumatic experiences are hard to deal with all at once. Many survivors have trouble believing that they were abused and often vacillate between belief and disbelief. It's not easy to believe that the adults who were supposed to protect you would abuse you.

Believing you were abused is a process. It usually takes years before believing is fully integrated into yourself, into the various levels of your being.

Believing it happened does not necessarily mean that you think the abuse matters, that you think the abuse has affected your life. Believing the abuse matters means you can do something about the effects of it, which include low self-esteem, trouble with intimacy, lack of healthy boundaries, and substance abuse.

Breaking silence

The sexual molestation of children and adolescents thrives in an atmosphere of silence. Breaking the silence is an important part of the healing process. You move through the shame and secrecy that makes you feel worthless and keeps you isolated.

Resolution and moving on

Resolution and moving on happens when you begin to realize that your life is

See SURVIVORS, page 14

WNC PRIDE '91 Benefit Shows



Sunday, April 14th
in Asheville
at TRAX II
Showtime: Midnight



TWO GREAT SHOWS
IN
TWO GREAT TOWNS



Friday April 28th
in Hickory
at CLUB CABARET
Showtime: Midnight

NEED MORE

INFORMATION??

SALGA

SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN

LESBIAN AND GAY ALLIANCE

POST OFFICE BOX 197

ASHEVILLE, N. CAROLINA 28802

PLEASE JOIN SALGA IN '91
AS WE BREAK NEW GROUND FOR
LESBIAN AND GAY RIGHTS IN WNC,
THE STATE, AND THE NATION.

SALGA'S CURRENT EVENTS

ADOPT-A-HIGHWAY ▼ CULTURAL EVENTS COMMITTEE
NATIONAL DAY OF MOURNING ▼ GAY PRIDE FESTIVAL
SPEAKERS BUREAU ▼ NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY
MEDIA WATCH ▼ NON-DISCRIMINATION RESOLUTION

CALL 254-0292