

Clothesline Swollen with Tears from Abuse

Unspoken truths bring pain and hope

BY CHARITY PRATER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Lines of tattered, multi-colored shirts hang swollen with heavy tears from the painful memories of violence against women.

Each brightly-colored shirt has a story of rape, torture, kidnapping and domestic or sexual attacks. The words haunt passerbys who gaze at the unspoken truths. They are memories of hope, loss and sadness for the Portland Clothesline Project.

"I'm not going to cry," one anonymous woman writes in red print. Another writes, "The silence was killing me," and yet another, "I wore red that day".

Saturday's event was held in

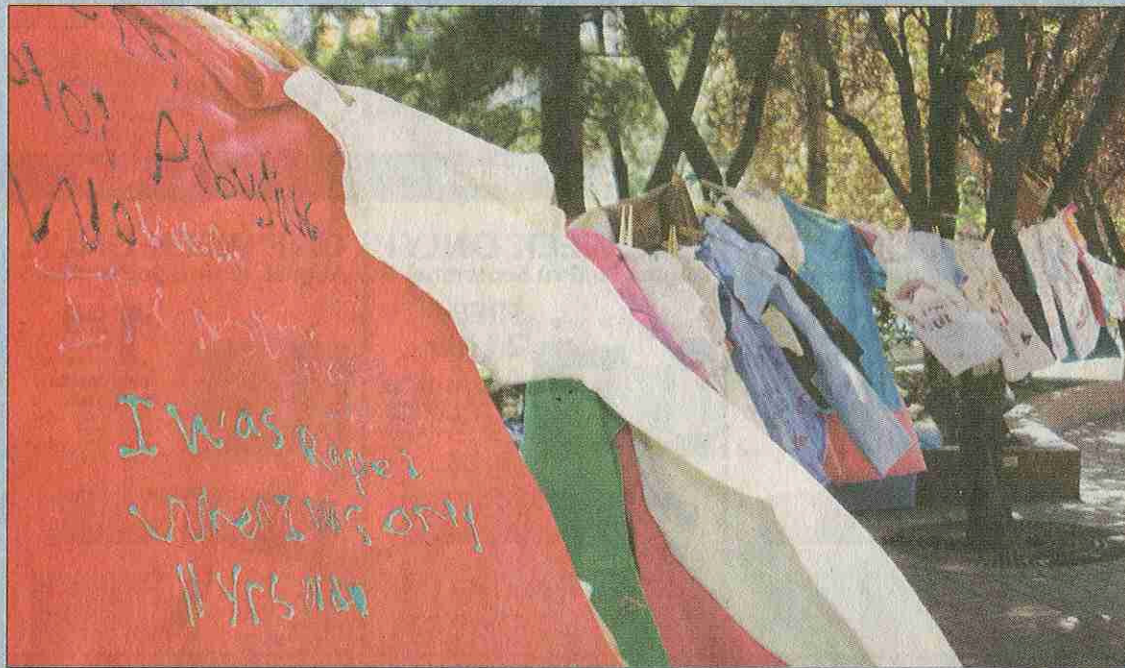


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Messages of hope, sadness and pain are expressed by survivors of domestic violence in words painted on shirts in the Portland Clothesline Project.

conjunction with the 86th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitu-

tion, giving women the right to vote. It also marked the 15th anniversary of the Clothesline Project in Port-

land.

Rachel Carey-Harper, now 55, created the project 16 years ago in

Cape Cod, Mass. The idea came to her when a very distraught woman approached her at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. with the statistic that the number of women who have been murdered by their intimate partners is greater than the number of soldiers killed in the Vietnam War.

Although lucky enough to not have had a personal history with violent crime herself, as other women have, Carey-Harper believes that all women are connected by domestic violence.

"One person's experience is my experience," she says.

The Clothesline Project was brought to Portland by three women, Fran Petschek, 76, Pat Hollingsworth, 83, and Yvonne Simmons, 59.

Simmons is a survivor of violent crime and was empowered by

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PHOTO BY CHARITY PRATER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Yvonne Simmons, a survivor of domestic violence, gains strength and inspiration from the painful truths painted on shirts in the Portland Clothesline Project.

A Clothesline Swollen with Tears

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the display.

“Violence is so widespread,” she said. “The shirts help to release the pain.”

Like Tibetan prayer flags, the shirts begin to disintegrate the longer they hang on the clothesline. This symbolizes the powers of healing through the passing of time. Some women chose to take their shirts with them, burning them, burying them, or stowing them away.

Patricia Barrera, Victim Services Coordinator for Clackamas County Community Corrections, spoke about the relationship Portland has to violent crimes against women.

Statistics have shown that violent crime increases in neighborhoods where adult retail stores and strip clubs exist, Barrera said. Crime rates also increase for women involved in prostitution.

“Portland is known as ‘Porn’ town,” she said. “For every one strip club or porn retail store Los Angeles has Portland has 11.”

On average prostitutes are sexually abused at the age of 13 and later in life by family members, boy-

friends, and husbands.

“Even the ‘John’s’ are plagued with sexually transmitted diseases, being robbed constantly, losing time and money, and are often murdered,” Barrera said.

The Portland Clothesline Project’s long term goal is to stop violent crimes against women altogether.

As a grassroots movement, the hosts aren’t overwhelmed with the notion of ending violent crimes entirely.

Carey-Harper has been working on phase two of her national effort, which addresses racism as well.

“Violence against women is the result of sexist people. Men contribute to sexism like white people contribute to racism,” she said.

Women’s advocates see a violent-free society is an attainable goal.

“We have to begin with treating each other with respect and love people who we disagree with or don’t really like,” Carey-Harpersaid.

For every one strip club or porn retail store Los Angeles has, Portland has 11.

— Patricia Barrera, Victim Services Coordinator

Clothesline projects have caught on all across the country and usually include music, shirt making and speeches from victims and professionals from the local community. All men are welcome to share their personal experiences or engage in the event, however, it is specifically geared to support women and children.

Saturday’s downtown event was a small one, but it didn’t go unnoticed. Drivers yelled “Thank you!” out of their windows, dog walkers surveyed the clothesline with emotional faces, and curiosity lured in a few men who obviously felt sympathetic towards the emotional evidence left by the outspoken victims.