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'Peaceful and welcoming'

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GURNEE – A scary reality in the world is that sexual attacks happen every day to women, men, and children all around the world. And after the horrible experience of an attack is the beginning of a long healing process.

“What if it happened to you, or your mom, or a friend, or anyone you cared about?” said Margie Keevan of Lindenhurst. “Wouldn’t you want a support system to be there?”

The Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center in Gurnee became that support system for Keevan after she was raped four years ago. The experience she went through in January 2004 led her to seek the help of a therapist at the center.

A few days after her attack by an acquaintance, Keevan was taken to the hospital for an examination and an advocate from the Zacharias Center was called.

“She was there in less than 10 minutes,” Keevan said.

And even though she was frightened, Keevan said, she felt that someone was looking out for her.

“She [the advocate] held my hand through most of the examination,” Keevan said.

The advocate explained to her step-by-step what was going to happen during the examination. And at the end, she provided her with a business card and told her where the center is located.

Keevan says that she was surprised when she went to the center for her first therapy appointment.

“When I walked in I thought that the building was very peaceful and welcoming,” Keevan said.

Keevan’s attacker was not convicted. The evidence that was on her body was gone by the time she went to the hospital to get the rape exam done. Keevan was disappointed, but she meets with her therapist, whom she credits for her better state of mind today.

“She’s extremely patient; even when I’m angry and screaming,” Keevan said. “I have had so many positive changes because of her.”

Keevan said that her therapist is like a family member to her because she feels like she can count on her and that no matter what she says she will be there to help her through this.

There are other cases in which the Zacharias Center was able to not only give emotional support but help the survivors put their attackers behind bars.

On Feb. 20, a man was sentenced to 20 years with the help of the legal advocacy of the Zacharias Center. He was charged



Margie Keevan, a sexual assault survivor, has been a client at the Zacharias Center since 2004. The Zacharias Center offers sexual assault victims emotional support but also has helped put offenders behind bars with its legal advocacy. (Amanda Schwengel photo)

with one predatory count of sexual assault and one count of child pornography.

"When the legal side supports a survivor, it helps to validate them and their feelings," said Michelle Minarcik, legal advocate at the Zacharias Center.

Minarcik also said that it is part of the healing process when the survivors are believed.

The legal advocacy of the center also helped put a sexual predator behind bars a couple of months ago. Minarcik said that this survivor used all aspects of the center's aid, medical advocacy, counseling and legal advocacy.

"In this case, the offender was sentenced to 118 years at the department of corrections," Minarcik said.

She said that there are drawbacks for the survivor when going through the legal system because sometimes the legal procedure can take years. But she added that there are many wonderful ways in which a survivor can find healing.

"I believe that all of my clients are brave and that with a healthy support system they can lead successful lives," said Stacey Coleman, adult/adolescent counselor at the Zacharias Center.

What You Should Know

Legal advocate Michelle Minarcik said that the person who has been assaulted usually has the evidence on their body. Therefore seeking help from the police and going to the hospital immediately is imperative. Minarcik also said that it is important to seek a professional to talk to because there are many feelings to work through after an experience like that.

Series overview

For five weeks, the Lake County Journals will examine the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center and the services it provides. Below is a look at the series in its entirety.

Feb. 28: Name change and background of the center.

March 6: How the center works with the community – The center's links with schools, hospitals and police.

March 13: A look at survivors of sexual abuse – When the system works and when it fails.

March 20: The center's children's program – Youth Allies Kares.

March 27: The people who are a part of the healing – The staff, volunteers and financial supporters of the center.

The Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center is at 4275 Old Grand Ave. in Gurnee. Its 24-hour hot line is 847-872-7799. For information call 847-244-1187 or visit its Web site at www.ZacahriasCenter.org.

COMMENTS

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