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Wednesday, June 25, 2008



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Zacharias center luncheon marks its 25th year

By KATHY GRESEY - kgresey@nwnewsgroup.com

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GURNEE – Teresa Hall Bartels has seen the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center transform.

Bartels served as a volunteer at the center – formerly known as LaCASA – when it began helping survivors of sexual abuse and assault 25 years ago.

Many changes have taken place since that time, Bartels said before speaking at the center's sixth annual Women Helping Women luncheon in Gurnee on June 20. The luncheon raises awareness and funding for the Zacharias center.

"There are going to be 600 people [at this lunch], and we couldn't get 20 people to care about this 20 years ago," she said. "This is not work that is easy for people to talk about. And it's not easy to get funding for it."

The Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center is a nonprofit organization that provides services to men, women and children who have been affected by sexual violence. It is funded by grants, the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, United Way, and individual and corporate donors.

About 26,000 people will receive services from the center through various programs this year. Those services are free of charge and include individual counseling, advocacy, art therapy, child-assault prevention and a 24-hour crisis line, said Lynn Osborn, associate director of the group.

"And we're only reaching a fraction of the population," she said of the center's more in-depth services. "But to be entrusted with somebody's healing, it really is an honor."

Lori Viera served as a counselor at the center for one year. She said the most important part of her job was informing clients about the affects of sexual abuse and assault.

"Education is key," she said. "What is sexual trauma, and how does it affect a family? We have videos, books and other educational resources to help people understand the impact of what happened to them."

During the luncheon, community members had the opportunity to tour the Zacharias center, which features private counseling rooms, a courtyard and playrooms for children.

Jackie Weaver, of Libertyville, said she was impressed with the center after seeing it for the first time.

"It's a beautiful facility for people to come to when they are in need," she said.

Employees of the luncheon's primary sponsor, Wolters Kluwer, attended the event as well.

Zrinka Allen, director of strategic staffing at Wolters Kluwer, said her company was committed to helping the Zacharias center because it was a critical community resource.

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"We really wanted to make sure the important work that the center does continues," she said. "It's so rewarding to know that you're helping others."

Perhaps no one knows that better than Torrie Flink, who has served as executive director of the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center for 20 years.

Flink spoke about her experiences at the center while at the luncheon.

She said that she amazed to know the center had helped thousands of people since its began operating 25 years ago.

"I've heard all the horror stories about children being raped and women being tortured, and just when you think you've heard it all, you hear another one," she said. "The sliver lining is we have stories about champions – stories of victims who turned around and became survivors. It's an honor, for me, to celebrate 25 years."

Want to help?

To learn more about making a donation to the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center, 4275 Old Grand Avenue, Gurnee, call 847-244-1187 or visit www.zachariascenter.org.