

Protecting Chatham's children from sexual predators

By Deborah R. Meyer

"MY EARLIEST MEMORY is being sexually abused by my great uncle at a family reunion. I was 4 years old."

So opens "Childhood Stories Documentary," created by the national non-profit Darkness to Light (D2L) whose mission is to empower people to prevent child sexual abuse.

Jessica Wimberly is the Child Services Director for the Chatham Y and has been involved in some form of childcare for the past 10 years in Chatham. "Child sexual abuse is a very dark subject. It is hard to talk about."

But that is changing for Chatham residents. Wimberly is heading up a Chatham initiative, spearheaded by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro YMCA, to help educate Chatham residents about preventing child sexual abuse using the Darkness to Light information and training programs. A series of community awareness meetings called Prevent Now are being held, as are more formal training events called Stewards of Children training, that last 2.5 to 3 hours. Attendees are then able to go back to the organizations they are involved with and help put preventive strategies in place. One of the most important things that organizations can do is to eliminate the opportunity so there are no one adult, one child situations.

"I have had children in my care who had been abused or were going through the healing process. What I know is that we do reactionary measures. We teach children in schools about good touch and bad touch and that is important but one thing I had not come across was training for adults on a preventative end that would keep our kids safe," Wimberly said.

In 2010, Wimberly and Kim Grooms, the Executive Branch Director of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro YMCA, traveled to Charleston, SC, the base of D2L, to take

its training. They were walking around the city, which was in the middle of a child sexual abuse prevention. There were D2L stickers and literature everywhere. "This was a community that had trained over five percent of their population. It occurred to me that if I was a child abuser the last place I would live would be in Charleston. They are protecting their kids. I want that for my community," Wimberly said.

Statistics are alarming. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Wimberly is in charge of 13 after school programs in Chatham County. "If you are considering enrolling your child in any type of program, ask about its child protective policies," Wimberly said.

"It could not happen to my child" — that is what goes through parents' minds when this topic is broached. But child sexual abuse exists across all socioeconomic and cultural strata.

Wimberly has been surprised in a good way by the response the meetings and training have been received in Chatham. "There is a willingness for people to break down their boundaries. They say, 'I can talk about this. I want to make a change.' I am very proud to be a part of a community that is willing to do this," Wimberly said.

Tricia Smar is the prevention specialist spearheading this initiative out of the main branch Chapel Hill-Carrboro YMCA.

"It makes perfect sense for us to lead this initiative as we are raising the community's children at the YMCA," Smar said.

Training community members is a main mission, but Smar said it is also very important that people start to talk about sexual abuse of children and realize it is a community problem. "It affects every part of the community so it makes sense for all to be involved. We need to create an environment where child sexual abuse is no longer tolerated," Smar said.

The YMCA's goal is to train 17,000

people in Chatham, Orange, and Durham counties by 2016. Over 2,100 people have been trained since the initiative began in 2011, with some completing additional training to become facilitators, which means they can lead the Stewards of Children trainings. There are 20 people in Durham who have trained as facilitators and 20 people covering Chatham and Orange. Smar said, "Some are strictly volunteers and others work it in through their jobs. We would have no legs if we did not have these facilitators. The amount of steam we have is all from having these passionate people."

Cindy McElhinney is D2L's Director of Programs. "This is so hard to talk about because people cannot wrap their brains around adults raping our children. It is hard to think about it so we don't think about it. We don't think it will happen to us," McElhinney said.

But it happens to a lot of us. According to a report out of the University of Michigan, there are 39 million survivors of child sexual abuse in America.

McElhinney said that there are 50 Ys across the country working with their communities using the D2L program. "We've designed the Stewards of Children curriculum to facilitate discussion. I think our culture is at an interesting point. For the first time ever this issue is on people's radar because of Penn State and Syracuse University. I think even when we are constantly barraged about the Catholic Church abuse we don't connect with it. With Penn State, everybody connected to it. It conjures up images of a large, respected school with awesome athletic programs. People see that if it can happen there, it can happen here," McElhinney said.

She said that the D2L program, with 3,000 facilitators in 49 states and 15 countries, has been evaluated for effectiveness. "We know it changes attitudes and behaviors," McElhinney said.

7 STEPS TO PROTECTION

- Learn the Facts. Understand the Risks
- Minimize Opportunity
- Talk About It
- Stay Alert
- Make a Plan
- Act on Suspicions
- Get Involved

Darkness to Light focuses on prevention but also emphasizes recognizing and reacting responsibly to child sexual abuse. "It is so important to recognize if it is happening. We can use the recent media cases as to why. We can see that had some people reacted more responsibly, that could have had a better outcome for these children," McElhinney said. Children can heal if there is early intervention and appropriate response.

Smar said that at every training there are survivors who stay after to tell her about an experience they have been through. They say that now that they have been through the training they can now do something with the pain they have been feeling. Smar said, "They tell me they wish Darkness to Light had been around when they were younger."

Contact Smar at tsmar@chcymca.org or at 442.9622, ext. 137. April is Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Month and in addition to the ongoing free trainings being offered, there are a number of additional community trainings and fundraising events scheduled in the Chapel Hill area. Details are at www.chcymca.org/d2l.

Deborah R. Meyer is a Chatham writer. She can be contacted at 919.942.3252.

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