



Inner Voice members Denine and Patricia flank Bethsaida Executive Director Claire Silva. Photo by Melanie Savage.

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Providing a safe haven for women

BY MELANIE SAVAGE Staff Writer

For victims of childhood sexual abuse, recovery can be a frightening, lonely process. "It's like that dirty little secret," said Claire Silva, executive director of Bethsaida Community, Inc., an organization with a mission to "create a hope, a home, a family for homeless or at-risk women," according to its Web site.

For 22 years, Bethsaida has provided supportive services to women through the Katie Blair House and the Flora O'Neil Apartments in Norwich. "Each year, we have about 30 women go through the Katie Blair House program," said Silva. And at least 70 percent of those women, according to Silva's conservative estimate, "have been sexually abused at some point in their lives."

"The actual number is probably much higher," said Silva, "because many women don't talk about the abuse.

"Women who have been abused need other women to talk to," said Patricia, a group member who assisted in putting together the group's doctrine. "Inner Voice is a safe place, and it's confidential. You don't have to worry about what's said there."

While Silva acknowledges that traditional therapy has a place in any survivor's life, it has its limitations. For one, it can be expensive. "It's not always as easy as people might think to find a therapist who specializes in sexual abuse," said Silva. "And I don't know of any other free support group for sexual abuse survivors in Southeastern Connecticut."

And, while a relationship with a personal therapist can take months to develop, support group participants share a common ground from the beginning. "You know what you're there to talk about," said Patricia. "Everyone is there to talk about the same thing."

"It's a common ground," said group member Denine, comparing Inner Voice to other 12-step programs such as AA and NA. "It's all about recovering from the abuse, the trauma. I feel comfortable, after 19 years, being able to talk about There's a stigma attached to it."

According to Stop the Silence, a nonprofit organization working toward the prevention and treatment of childhood sexual abuse, statistics are rough estimates, because sexual abuse often goes unreported. "The best facts we have point to one in three to one in four girls, to one in seven to one in eight boys by the time they are 18 years old," according to the organization's Web site. The results can be devastating, with survivors more likely to go on to abuse drugs and alcohol, or become involved in illegal activities.

Silva, an author who has written a book from the perspective of personal experience, understands the importance of supportive services. "There are so few resources available out there for women," she said. So recently, Silva started Inner Voice, a free support group for women who are sexual abuse survivors what happened to me."

"It's easy for people to say 'forget about it, it was a long time ago' ," said Silva. "But it doesn't go away. Seeing these women go from being uncomfortable to being more empowered and at ease with sharing, I think we're lucky in that we have women here who are interested in helping other women."

Inner Voice meets the second Thursday of the month from 5 to 6 p.m. at 225 Main St., above Dunkin' Donuts. Any woman who is a survivor is welcome, but participants are encouraged to call ahead to leave a first name and phone number. Inner Voice can be reached at 860-886-7511, ext. 204, or see the Bethsaida Web site at www.bethsaidact.org.