



Adam Amato Photographer

Sexual Wellness Advocacy Team intern advisor Whitney Zeigler watches the SWAT interns perform skits for the Prevention of Interpersonal Violence class Thursday afternoon, April 29.

Student counsels victims of abuse

Whitney Zeigler is an intern advisor and student leader for the University's Sexual Wellness Advocacy Team

By Chelsea Duncan
Senior News Reporter

When she was five years old, University graduate student Whitney Zeigler was sexually abused. But as she grew up, she found others with similar experiences, went through counseling and began to find support in other survivors.

Now, Zeigler hopes to pass that support on to others.

"Something kept drawing me back into this field," she said. "I think this is where I'm meant to be."

Zeigler is the intern advisor for the University's Sexual Wellness Advocacy Team, an internship program in which students dedicate time to educating others about sexual assault, relationship violence, the dangers of stalking and healthy sexual relationships.

"It affects so many people, especially women," she said.

Zeigler, who is working toward her master's degree in international studies, said her personal experiences have led her to work toward preventing domestic and sexual violence. Her interest in creating change began taking shape as she grew up and talked with other sexual abuse survivors.

"I became kind of an informal advocate," she said, adding that being able to speak openly helps survivors come to terms with their experiences. "It gives them somewhat of a community. It takes away the stigma and the shame."

After receiving her undergraduate degree in art from California's Scripps College, Zeigler said she expected to continue advocating awareness through her art. But first she wanted to gain more of an international perspective on life in general.

She joined the Peace Corps in 1999 and remained a member until 2001, teaching English to high school students in Poland, but soon realized she would face more challenges than simply teaching.

"Sometimes my students would come to school with obvious bruises," she said. "It was a small community so everyone knew what was going on, but no one wanted to talk about it. It was taboo."

Zeigler said she tried to look at the situation not only from her perspective, but in terms of the community's cultural values as well. But she couldn't find a common ground.

"I just can't accept violence in any form," she said. "I didn't expect that to be the hardest thing to confront there."

She said she offered to let some of the students stay with her, but they refused because they knew their parents would find them. Because physical abuse is considered a "family

problem" in Poland, Zeigler said it seemed as if it wasn't her place to help.

"I guess my interference wouldn't have been accepted in the community," she said.

The community also lacked resources for victims of domestic abuse. Zeigler said she wanted to find ways to help victims of violence such as her former students.

When she returned to the States, Zeigler began researching domestic violence resource institutions in Poland. She found a few in some of the larger cities and began making contacts.

She returned to Poland this past summer to visit the organizations and also the community she had lived in previously to tell its citizens about the resources. She also decided to write her master's thesis based on her experiences. Her thesis analyzes the most effective strategies to confront domestic violence with an emphasis on trends of domestic violence in Poland. Once it is completed, she said she plans to send copies to some of her former students and friends back in Poland in hopes of encouraging people to bring the issues to the front line.

ASUO Women's Center Office Coordinator Lori Brown said she holds a lot of respect for Zeigler because of her many accomplishments.

"She's taken positive action that's come out of trauma," Brown said. "It just shows that she really is a survivor."

She said Zeigler was instrumental in making the Sexual Wellness Advocacy Team a success on campus because of her passion and initiative.

"She has high expectations for the program and she inspires people to meet them," she said.

Senior Yuri Akahira, who has been involved in the program for two years, said she didn't know anything about sexual and domestic abuse before she joined the team. But because Zeigler has so much knowledge about the issues, Akahira said she caught on quickly.

"It's definitely important for everybody to know how much these issues affect the community," she said.

Zeigler said students who want to get involved with the program this summer should pick up applications in the Women's Center and turn them in by May 4.

"We're trying to recruit a variety of people from all walks of life," she said.

Zeigler said she hopes to continue educating students about these issues in the future, and she also wants to work in international gender and development areas.

"I want to make a difference," she said. "And I feel like I can."

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