

What silence sounds like

photo submitted by Jennifer Whitten



Jennifer Whitten's artwork, including this piece, is on display at the Wilsonville campus through Oct. 28.

BY ELIZABETH KESSEL

"Why not just leave?" they say, or "I didn't know this was going on." "But, he's a great guy," they object. "Leaving isn't right." These are some of the all too common responses from friends and family when a loved one reveals that they are in an abusive relationship. But artist Jennifer Whitten wants to change the way people think about domestic violence.

October is national domestic violence awareness month, which is important since one out of every three women is harmed by an intimate partner.

According to Ignacio Gonzalez-Reyes, a counselor at Clackamas Community College, domestic violence is "any type of perpetrated assault on a member of a domestic partnership of any kind."

For this month, Jennifer Whitten, an alumna of Clackamas Community College and current student at Marylhurst, shared the artwork of her personal story in a gallery located at the Wilsonville campus.

"'What Silence Sounds Like' came from the idea that I might be able to show people how silence, that silencing of victims, can become something very,

very loud and detrimental," Whitten said.

Whitten's first piece was done within days, and it took her two months to finish all of the artwork. Her gallery, comprised mainly of paintings, can be viewed through Oct. 28. During that time, a silent auction is also being held for each piece, and the funds will go towards a scholarship for those who are escaping domestic violence.

Altogether there are sixteen pieces of art, and each has a description of what Whitten went through and why she created that piece. The descriptions tell her story, and by walking through the gallery, they almost create a timeline.

Whitten will forever remember what she has gone through, not only mentally and emotionally, but also through the scars physically given to her. She was

pushed down stairs, and she feared for her life and her son's.

"I wanted the collection to focus on the culture of silence that surrounds domestic violence. It is not a frequent subject of media coverage, debate or dinnertime conversation. We

generally tend to shy away from it as a subject of conversation, because it makes people uncomfortable or feel helpless," Whitten said.

Domestic violence isn't just physical. Joyce Gabriel, the facility and events coordinator for the Wilsonville campus, commented on Whitten's artwork, though she suggested that the work is so powerful that it can speak for itself. As a survivor of domestic violence as well, Gabriel recalled that her experience was different from Whitten's.

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"Out of all the exhibits...I'm proudest of her exhibit," Gabriel said.

Warning signs of domestic violence include changes in behavior such as wearing sunglasses inside a building or someone who is outgoing and sociable becoming suddenly withdrawn. The best way to approach someone who might be in an abusive relationship is to open up a conversation and make sure the person feels safe.

"I believe that if everyone found their voice and their power regarding domestic violence, then intimate partner abuse wouldn't be an issue at all anymore," Whitten said. "We'd wipe it out by shining light in all the dark corners it hides in. Abusers depend on silence. We can, and must eradicate it!"

Perhaps Whitten's artwork will help break the silence and create understanding surrounding the issue of abuse. According to one of Whitten's artwork descriptions, she remembers the questions her friends and family asked, such as, "Why didn't you leave?" She would much rather they ask, "Why was he abusing you?"