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New interview room creates a softer setting for victims of Keizer crime

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

For the last three years, Project Beloved, a nonprofit organization in Texas, has partnered with multiple law enforcement agencies to install soft interview rooms in police stations at no cost to the department.

The idea behind having a soft interview room is to make it easier and less traumatic for victims and witnesses to report on sensitive crimes.

Project Beloved has installed numerous soft interview rooms for police departments in the southern part of the country, but last month the nonprofit renovated their first soft interview room on the west coast at the Keizer Police Department (KPD).

"Some of the core traits that Keizer Police looks for in officers are things like empathy and compassion. Using a more trauma-informed approach with people is putting those values into action," said KPD detective Ben Howden said.

Howden was the one who originally proposed that KPD create a soft interview room after attending a Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) training in Portland last February.

"The training is based on neuroscience and research around trauma and memory recall. The way we talk to people to try to elicit memories, often memories from trauma, and the environment they are in is very important in helping facilitate someone's memory recall. It's not just in how you phrase questions, it involves being in a comfortable, soft, feeling space," Howden said.

During the week-long training, one of the attendees spoke about the important work of Project Beloved, which motivated Howden to check out their website and get in contact with Tracy Matheson — who created Project Beloved after her daughter was sexually assaulted and murdered in 2017.

KEIZERTIMES/Matt Rawlings

Det. Ben Howden inside the Keizer Police Department's "soft" interview room, a space designed to help victims of crime recount their experiences in a less intimidating atmosphere. The room is a gift from the non-profit Project Beloved.

Howden wrote the proposal to add a soft interview room in March. Once KPD Chief John Teague got on board with the plan, Howden was able to convince Matheson to send out two of her employees to decorate the room.

The two Project Beloved staff members painted the interview room in soft yellow and decorated the walls with nature photography to honor Matheson's deceased daughter, Molly — who had taken the photos. The room also features three comfortable chairs, florescent lights and a lamp — the project was completed on Dec. 11.

"It's very comfortable. It's much less of a utilitarian feeling," Howden said.

Howden has been a detective with KPD for the last 14 years, but has only recently developed a passion for Trauma Informed Care (TIC) and the positive impacts it has to help victims tell their story, which in-turn, makes it easier for detectives to solve cases and catch criminals.

"This is not only scientifically backed, it makes a statement to victims of really difficult events that we are there for them and we're going to create a soft, welcoming environment for them when they have to talk about some of the most difficult experiences of their life," Howden said. "Traditional interviewing methods can lead to secondary victimization for an individual who is recalling the experience. If they feel like they are being badgered or berated with questions regarding something that was very difficult, then that can be extremely challenging for that person emotionally and psychologically."

Howden has used the room only once since its creation and felt that the interaction was particularly successful. He believes that the room will get more usage when the COVID-19 pandemic slows down.

"With COVID going on, we're trying not to talk to people in constrained spaces like this. It will be interesting to see the difference it makes as COVID hopefully begins to settle down," Howden said.

"It puts everyone in the space in a different frame of mind. It's a more of a nurturing environment rather than seeking very specific answers. Dealing with people in a more sensitive and understanding way helps people to see we want to come alongside them."

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WEDNESDAY: 6:30 pm Awana; Youth Group; Adults

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393-5323
5303 River Rd. N., Keizer
Father Gary L. Zerr, Pastor
Saturday Vigil Liturgy: 5:30 p.m.
Sundays: 8:15 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
La Misa en Español: 12:30 p.m.

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a member of Open Door Churches of Salem-Keizer
REV. ALYSSA BAKER, Lead Pastor
Services are Sunday at 10 am
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Faith Lutheran Church, ELCA
4505 River Road N, Keizer • 503-393-4507
www.FLCkeizer.org
Pastor Linda Matz Easterling
Sunday School - 9:00 am
Worship Service -10:00 am

Keizer Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
6945 Wheatland Rd. NE 393-6843
www.KeizerChristian.org
Worship and Children's Church • 10:00 a.m.
Office Hours 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Mon. – Fri.

COUNTRYSIDE Christian Church
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