

Safe Space Photography Project

“My Body’s my Own”



‘Friendship’ – Winner of the CHEX photo competition

Earlier this year, CHEX invited network members to share their photographs of community-led health activity as part of a photo competition. We received a great range of photographs which represent the breadth of activity across Scotland and we were delighted to hear about how communities are responding to their needs and priorities at a local level. It was the above photograph entitled ‘Friendship’ which we found particularly striking in representing the outcomes for the participants of SafeSpace in Dunfermline. We asked Pauline McGee, Manager of SafeSpace to tell us more about the background to the photograph.

Safe Space has been established within the local community of Dunfermline for 22 years, offering a range of support to survivors of sexual abuse (male & female aged 12+) through counselling, group work and a Justice Support service.

Working to a Community Development model of practice, survivors are at the heart of development of the service with their voices heard and represented on a number of levels, including planning of future group work programmes. This offers access to

therapeutic, social, educational and creative outlets which aim to break down barriers experienced through shame, secrecy, fear and low self esteem.

Safe Space recognises that those who have suffered sexual abuse as children often experience further discrimination throughout life, be that through lack of understanding of the long term effects of abuse, misunderstanding of survivors coping strategies and lack of opportunities to recognise or develop personal talents and skills. Many Safe Space volunteers are themselves survivors, local people with understanding of community needs with skills and enthusiasm to support and empower others creating a local, highly skilled and reliable workforce. Other volunteers bring skills from a range of professional and personal backgrounds. In 2010 Safe Space gained COSCA Recognition as a Counselling and Counselling Skills Organisation and also achieved an Inspirational Organisation Award from Fife's Voluntary Sector.

Safe Space receives core funding from Fife Council, grants from a number of trusts and foundations and non financial support from many community organisations. A grant secured from The Hedley Foundation allowed Safe Space to purchase photography equipment and employ a sessional worker to run two photography projects which were open to all clients. Cameras were also donated from ADSA Halbeath, Dunfermline. There was no uptake from male survivors for this project, which highlights the significant barriers male survivors face.

Initially there were huge challenges for the women who took part with levels of self loathing making it difficult for some to even look at themselves in a mirror. Many survivors have been exposed to pornography or been photographed as part of their abuse and can be greatly affected by loss of control as to where these images are and how their bodies are viewed. Ownership of this project, mastery of the equipment, overcoming barriers and sharing of ideas has been a great achievement for all participants.

“At first I felt very scared and uncomfortable being photographed by others but we were all encouraged to share our fears and could opt out at any point. However through time we talked a lot about our self image and there were so many things we had in common. The feeling of being ‘different’ soon disappeared and we did laugh a lot.”

Being seen and being heard is another big issue for survivors who have often kept the secret of abuse for many years therefore choosing to work with positive images of strength and survival has been hugely empowering as has development of spontaneity, creativity and playfulness.

“I definitely feel a change within myself. I didn't like my body before, thought I was nothing but today I can say I am special and I was meant to have a good life. I'm going to make the best of it and have a whoopee time because I can't do anything about the past but can do a lot about the future.”

Taking photographs of one another opened dialogue about shame and the effect it had on their lives with a great sense of mutual support for exploring and sharing experiences. Many women had missed out on family photographs with siblings, children or grandchildren and were now able to face this added sense of loss while accepting that they could now positively encourage and be part of future family photographs.

"I've always wondered how my family and kids saw me because since I was wee my dad would tell me my face showed everything I was thinking and I have always tried too much to have control over that."

Working toward an exhibition of the photographs offered a shared sense of purpose, participation and communication as to what type of images would be displayed and a sense of pride in what they have achieved has paved the way for more advanced workshops.

Safe Space winning CHEX photography competition has been a huge bonus for participants and the whole organisation. We are immensely proud of this achievement considering the fears and trepidation that have had to be overcome at every stage of the project. An exhibition of images from this project will take place in the community within the coming year and we hope CHEX readers and contributors will join us for the celebration and to meet the photographers!

Please note that from 1st April 2012 Safe Space will have moved to 29B Ling House, Canmore Street, Dunfermline KY12 7NU. Telephone 01383 739084.

Email safe-space.co.uk. Check website for future groups, events and information
www.safe-space.co.uk

Pauline McGee
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