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NU's 'Surviving...Thriving: A Journey of Healing Through Art' honors survivors, raises awareness of domestic violence



Attendees view artwork created by survivors of domestic violence at the fifth "Surviving...Thriving: A Journey of Healing Through Art" exhibit, held in observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month. (NU photo)

A viewing of artwork created by survivors of domestic violence was the centerpiece of an event Sept. 30 at Niagara University's Castellani Art Museum called "Surviving...Thriving: A Journey of Healing Through Art." This was the fifth year the university has hosted the exhibition, which was held in observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month and tied to the Red Flag Campaign, a national public awareness initiative designed to encourage college students to intervene when they see a warning sign ("red flag") of partner violence.

The university partnered with several community agencies in organizing the event, including Pinnacle Community Services and the YWCA of the Niagara Frontier, which provided more than 80 pieces of artwork created by the adult and child survivors of domestic violence participating in their programs. The event raised more than \$800, which was donated to Pinnacle Community Services.

Exhibits included "Unmasking Domestic Violence," which featured masks that symbolized survivors' experiences; "Visions of Strength, Voices of Survivors," which paired courageous personal survivor narratives

with black and white images; "Place Matters," a collection of structures created by adult survivors to represent places that make them feel safe and supported; and "The People in Your Neighborhood," created by children, who identified the people who helped them to grow, learn, feel safe, and feel loved.

"All of these pieces were created by survivors as a form of art healing, a way for their voices to be heard, and a way to raise awareness of the impact domestic violence has on our community," said Larissa Bachman, director of Passage Domestic Violence Services at Pinnacle Community Services.

In addition to the artwork, the event featured the "Silent Witness Project," a reconstruction of a national traveling memorial honoring individuals who were killed in acts of domestic violence. The 21 black silhouettes, each with the name and date of death of a Niagara County domestic violence victim, represent the number of victims as of 2020. "The Clothesline Project," a collection of T-shirts with messages to raise awareness of domestic and sexual violence, was displayed both inside and outside of the museum.

"St. Vincent de Paul was about

making systemic changes," said Dr. Debra Colley, executive vice president of Niagara University. "That's what we're doing here this evening. This work is not just a once-in-a-while type of event, it is what we're thinking deeply about on this campus. But no one can do this work alone. This is work we do together. And we are so proud to have all of you here because it is a shining example of what St. Vincent de Paul challenges us to do: to look out for one another and to make a difference where we are in our lives, so that that difference changes the lives of people who need us the most."

Dr. Jennifer Beebe, associate professor of counseling/education, and Dr. Dana Radatz, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice, spearheaded the program on the NU campus.

"Intimate partner or dating violence is a pervasive problem among college students," Beebe said. "As a result, we are taking a proactive approach to provide a bystander effort to decrease this epidemic on our campus and in the local community."

"We were excited to bring this event back to campus again this year, as this year marks its fifth anniversary," Radatz said. "This is a truly wonderful milestone to reach, as the event allows us to not only raise awareness about relationship violence within our community, but also highlight the services and resources available in our area."

In addition to Pinnacle and the YWCA, cohosts of the event included the Niagara County Sheriff's Office - victim assistance unit and domestic violence intervention program, the Niagara Falls Police Department - domestic violence unit, and Niagara University's Castellani Art Museum, which provided the setting for the exhibits to be displayed.

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