

Western Morning News

The Voice of the Westcountry



Going-going-gone ... Devon's Babbage computer off to Australia plus the latest property news



Lottery cash ... where it goes in the Westcountry

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32p

WEATHER: Mostly dry with sunny intervals

ISSUES

Child sex abuse survivors often struggle to come to terms with their past. But one woman has a very different approach. Social Affairs Correspondent **WAILIM WONG** reports

Getting to grips with the pain behind the mask

THE mental torment of child sex abuse stays with the victims throughout their lives but the healing efforts of a pioneering American artist working in the Westcountry is providing hope for many who are dragged down by feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Katheryn Trenshaw, who recently moved to Totnes, has gained an international following for her work using mask-making sessions to help people come to terms with the demons of their past which continue to haunt them.

According to recent research in America, one in three girls and one in seven boys are sexually abused by a relative, neighbour or family friend by the time they are 18 and the issue affects people of all races and religions.

Katheryn, who was herself subjected to sexual abuse by her father as a child, prefers the term "survivor" to "victim" to discourage feelings of powerlessness and to give people new confidence to come to terms with the past while facing up to the future.

With a degree in psychology from Michigan State University, Katheryn also studied fine art at university in Brittany and her raku pottery and watercolours have won critical acclaim at exhibitions across the USA and Europe.

But it is her decision to use her art to help herself and other people heal the wounds of sexual abuse that has begun to attract the attention of counsellors and psychotherapists in Britain.

Her first sessions attracted controversy in the USA where critics attacked her for trying to unearth feelings, emotions and memories better left buried.

Katheryn's project, called Behind the Mask, has been running for five years and includes a series of workshops with a proven track record of success.

Mask-making, meditation and free-form dance are used to create an atmosphere of well-being and freedom.

"It is aimed at people who are not in crisis but who are still affected by the trauma of what happened to them," said Katheryn.



HEALING HANDS: Artist and therapist Katheryn Trenshaw uses mask-making sessions to help child sex abuse survivors. "There is an incredible amount of healing in the masks," she says. *Picture: PAUL SLATER*

"There is an incredible amount of healing in the masks."

Participants are encouraged to create their own symbols and masks as a form of personal protection.

Following Katheryn's own work, which includes strong imagery to display fear, rage, hidden emotions, dark secrets and suppressed anger, they use the masks to help offload hidden secrets and look for positive images.

"There is a lot of resistance to my work because people say 'these figures can't be true'," she said.

"I found the most resistance to what I was doing when I started, in June, 1990."

During one exhibition a man said he could see nothing wrong with child sex abuse since it had obviously made her a stronger person.

"Maybe I was less secure then because this is also a part of my own healing process," said Katheryn.

"Survivors do lack self-confidence. Low self-esteem, guilt and shame also stay with people.

"People who are looking for self-healing are still trying to come to terms with these feelings," she added.

"Often, if people have never done group work before, just meeting 12 other people in the workshops who have gone through similar experiences helps. There is a lot of healing in realising you are not the only one."

"There is a comfort in numbers and a camaraderie soon develops."

"When they are together making masks you see the same images coming up over and over again."

"Masks are a very old way of exposing emotions in African tribal society and are also used by aborigines in Australia and New Zealand."

"It is such an ancient custom and that is one of the reasons it is so powerful."

One child abuse survivor who took part in one of Katheryn's mask-making sessions in Kansas, said: "Not until the workshop had I actually been in touch with images that

could not be mistaken for anything but what really happened to me."

Katheryn's masks are made using the Japanese process known as raku which produces a black, smoky effect and metallic surfaces. She describes the firing process as "primitive and dramatic" and the final results are often unpredictable because of the changes in temperature during firing.

Her own works have been on show across Europe, most recently in the Netherlands. A series of Breaking the Silence workshops are also planned for survivors of child sex abuse in the Westcountry.

Psychotherapist Malcolm Stern, who works for the National Health Service in the South West, has referred several clients to Katheryn for help in the counselling process.

"Her work is brilliant because she is coming from the perspective of someone who has been through it herself."

"Child sex abuse is incredibly widespread and is a major taboo subject."

He said Katheryn's work was also valuable in combating the opposite of false memory syndrome, where incidents of abuse had taken place but survivors had blocked it out of their minds.

"People can keep it hidden away for years but often it is a crisis in their sexual life, maybe in their marriage, which brings it out."

"The adult who was abused as a child often feels they were partly to blame."

Mr Stern said successful counselling was coming to terms with the fact the abuse had taken place and going through the sense of rage and violation and the acceptance of the survivor that they were not to blame.

"It is going forward from that shame knowing they are not deemed forever as a human being."

Details of Katheryn's workshop and exhibition programme can be obtained by writing to Breaking the Silence, PO Box 3, Totnes TQ9 5WJ.