

Local organization provides therapy, hope for victims of sexual abuse

By Caleb Slinkard Transcript Editor | Posted: Friday, September 25, 2015 7:15 am

Bethesda's mission is crystal clear: to welcome with open arms any child in Oklahoma who needs help healing from sexual abuse.

It's a heart-wrenching responsibility, but one executive director Travis Humphrey and the rest of the Bethesda Inc. staff take very seriously.

"Our mission is to heal the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, and we do that through therapy, education and prevention," Humphrey said, adding that clients are typically in the program for nine to 12 months.

While most of the organization's clients come from Cleveland and Oklahoma counties, they work with both parents and children from across the state and do not charge a dime for their services, something they're able to do through funding from the United Way.

"We want to make sure any barrier is removed so the child has the opportunity to heal," Humphrey said.

Bethesda provides services for boys and girls ages 3-18, as well as their parents. Children receive both individual and group counseling sessions by licensed professionals, allowing them to overcome any feelings of isolation while processing their abuse and developing coping mechanisms so they can move forward with their lives.

Bethesda provides support groups for non-offending parents of their clients as well.

"The parents have the opportunity to participate in a support group, which helps them work through any shame or guilt they're experiencing," Humphrey said. "We often hear 'How could I let this happen?' We help them process their own grieving, pain and anger so they can focus on supporting



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Sammi Hembree (left) and Caliegh Donaghe volunteer at Bethesda's inaugural Camp Braveheart this past summer. Both women mentor clients ages 14-17 years old as they work through the trauma of sexual abuse.

their child as the child is healing.”

The organization also provides prevention programs in area schools to equip children with the vocabulary and the courage to speak up about abuse to a safe adult. The program, which reached more than 6,000 children in the Norman area last year, is not a sex-ed class, Humphrey said, but focuses on personal space and boundaries.

Bethesda holds three summer camps a year, one for girls ages 8-13, one for boys ages 8-13, and one for girls ages 14-17, which the organization began this year. Caleigh Donaghe, who works as a counselor at the camps, is a former Bethesda client.

“While I was in counseling, I went through the transition of being a victim to becoming a survivor,” she said. “It is because of the hard work that was put in during my counseling at Bethesda that I am now able to thrive in life and in my relationships with others. The counseling I received at Bethesda allowed me to find my voice.”

Donaghe added that she enjoys volunteering at the summer camps because she is able to make significant connections with the children who attend.

Humphrey said the summer camp programs, which last one week, result in three-to-four months of growth, and allow the campers to interact with former victims of child abuse while also experiencing a variety of therapeutic lessons.

“The children are able to see these young adults and see how they’re happy and healthy and productive, and they connect in many ways,” he said. “We want to instill in our clients the ability to accept that this has happened, that it is part of their history, but it does not define their future.”

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