

Facility offers care to victims of sexual assault

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By Ann Burdges
People Helping People

In 1986, a woman by the name of Ann Smiley revolutionized the way victims of sexual assault and abuse were cared for in Gwinnett County. Her grass-roots campaign for change led to the formation of Gwinnett Rape Crisis Center, as well as innovative improvements concerning victims rights.

Ann's vision is now known as Gwinnett Sexual Assault Center & Children's Advocacy Center, marking its 20th year as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Sadly, Ann passed away in 1994, but her vision and determination supported by friend Dr. Cora Salvino has grown to reach nearly 50,000 individuals. One woman's legacy is now carried on by an equally determined and educated professional staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The little house in Duluth that was the beginning of this journey has expanded into a beautiful facility warmly and professionally designed and equipped to offer the highest standards of response, care and services to individuals and families seeking respect, privacy and justice. GSAC-CAC provides forensic-medical services, sexual assault/abuse examination, collection of evidence, close interaction with law enforcement, advocacy, professional counseling, support groups, professional training, community outreach and public awareness without any cost to victims or filing of insurance claims.

By virtue of its purpose GSAC-CAC broaches a topic uncomfortable to all and difficult to comprehend.

What can be and needs to be publicly shared are the facts of sexual assault and child sexual abuse. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that:

n One in four girls will be sexually assaulted or abused before their 18th birthday; one in five for boys.

n Forcible rape still remains the most underreported violent crime with only about 30 percent reported to police. Less than 8 percent of reported cases make it to court; less than 5 percent of those will result in conviction.

n 10 percent of sexual assault victims are male, and the percentage is higher for children under 10.

Gwinnett County statistics are consistent with those reported nationally. GSAC-CAC served more than 1,800 individuals in 2004 alone.

In an effort to better educate and reach the community, this fall GSAC-CAC will launch an exciting and informative interactive Web site to provide information and resources to people seeking answers. The Web site will be a password-accessed databank of articles, research, curricula and training information for teachers, youth educators and guidance counselors in search of tools to educate children and teens about issues on healthy relationships, sexual harassment, dating violence, sexual assault, etc.

Funded by a combination of federal, state and private grants, corporate donations, and fundraising events, GSAC-CAC's greatest ally in generating funding, public awareness

and support comes from passionate individuals within the communities of Gwinnett County. Our story started with the difference of one woman's vision and voice, and angels continue to come in many forms and GSAC-CAC experiences them regularly in various disguises: to the jogger who one day passed by, rang the bell and dropped off a check for \$500, he said nothing and he didn't have to; to the mom who discussed personal safety with her children; and to the extraordinary volunteers who have come out at 3 a.m. to sit with a victim; these are the people that make what we do possible. Yet, I am truly the lucky one. I live and breathe a job that sees the worst and the best of humanity, yet I leave every day knowing our seemingly "small group of people" made a difference!

"People Helping People" is a weekly column written by the executive directors of nonprofit organizations in Gwinnett County. Today's article was written by Ann Burdges of the Gwinnett Sexual Assault Center & Children's Advocacy Center.

Need help or know someone who does? The Gwinnett Helpline directs callers to the appropriate nonprofit agency. Call 770-995-3339.