



by Robin Minnick

Children are small. To them, the world can look like a sea of legs held together by belts and waistbands, with disembodied voices telling them what to do. When the voices turn angry and the belted legs chase, the whole world becomes a sea of danger to be navigated with desperate care. If bad things happen, it seems like there's no one to trust, no safe harbor. The Child Advocacy Center (CAC) is that safe harbor. CAC's stated mission is to "provide a safe and child friendly center that supports the prevention, investigation and prosecution of child abuse" with the help and support of community partners.

Their building at 222 Rowan Street in Fayetteville is warm and friendly with bright accents and kid-sized furniture. All the services a child needs are contained here, from forensic interviewers with rooms where children are encouraged to feel safe and comforted, to advocates who guide them and their parents through counseling

resources, to mental health counselors who provide therapy on-site. The children only have to tell their story once, and they do it here in secure, supportive circumstances. Afterwards, they are given fleece blankets made by volunteers. The children know that the blankets were made for them, and the awareness that someone believes in them and supports them is of major comfort. The Center was expressly created to "alleviate the trauma children experience once a disclosure of sexual abuse or serious physical abuse occurs." Prior to its existence, abused children had to recount their story to several different agencies in the course of seeking aid and refuge. Physical examinations had to be performed in Chapel Hill because there were no local qualified professionals or facilities.

Last year, the CAC served 616 abused children, 222 of them less than 7 years old. The year before, they served 465 children. Since being established in 1993, CAC have served 5,000 children and their families. In addition, the CAC provides child abuse prevention training to adults throughout

the county, training 1,821 adults in 2013-14 through programs such as Stewards of Children, Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse, and Internet Safety.

Faith Boehmer, Prevention Volunteer Coordinator, reminds us that prevention is a major part of fighting child abuse. To that end, CAC participates in the 19 Days Campaign started by the Women's World Summit Foundation. This campaign, sponsored in part by the Cumberland County Community Coalition for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse includes 19 days of activities and events geared toward educating and mobilizing communities about abuse and how to prevent it.

This year's events kick off with the Pinwheel Masquerade Ball on November 1 at the Metropolitan Room, Downtown Fayetteville. November 7 will see a Community Child Abuse Prevention Breakfast at the Kiwanis Center with guest speaker Dr. Sharon Cooper, Forensic Pediatrician. On Novem-

ber 13 and November 17, the film "Chosen," a documentary about sex trafficking, will be shown at the Cumberland County Headquarters Library. This free, informative film is appropriate for ages 13 and up. Also throughout the 19 Days Campaign, volunteers will be reading to groups of preschool children from Julie Federico's book, "Some Parts are Not for Sharing." Approximately 1,000 children throughout Cumberland County and Fort Bragg will learn about personal boundaries and appropriate touching in a sheltered, non-threatening way.

All the activities are geared toward raising awareness and encouraging members of the community to volunteer. "Prevention is key," writes CAC Executive Director Roberta Humphries in the CAC newsletter. "It is the most effective way to protect children from abuse and contributes to creating a culture of non-violence."

"The idea," Faith says, "is to challenge the world to activate and educate the community and to help us as citizens to see that we can do something, that we can be involved."

What does CAC hope to see from this campaign? "A community come together with community leaders as well as other citizens to bring awareness to a horrific situation," replies Faith. "The fact we saw 616 children last year is alarming. It is right here at our back door. We want to see people rallying around the cause, which brings awareness, and we hope it will put offenders on alert."

For tickets and more information, visit the center's website, www.childadvocacycenter.com.

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