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Willow Tree

By Randy Pease

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Entering its twentieth year, Willow Tree of Posey County has a new mission statement, but its mission remains essentially the same: breaking the silence surrounding sexual assault and domestic violence.

“Most victims want to be heard and believed,” said Beth Baro, Willow Tree director. “Victims have long felt that speaking out could endanger them, but silence has a way of perpetuating abuse. Survivors need someone to talk to and we provide that service as well as safety options.”

Baro first became aware of domestic abuse after her old college roommate was murdered by her husband. “Until then I didn’t have much knowledge of domestic violence. There were signs, -- red flags -- but I didn’t pay attention to them,” said Baro, who joined Willow Tree in 2003 after serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa.

“I’ve never been an especially corporate person,” she explained. “Nonprofit work was always more appealing to me.”

Willow Tree, according to its revised mission statement, “provides advocacy and assistance to those affected by domestic and sexual violence and strives to interrupt the cycle of violence through outreach and education.”

In addition to providing a sounding board for victims, Willow Tree offers safety options, including referring clients to other agencies or assigning them to a shelter. Currently no such shelter exists within Posey County. Baro hopes to remedy that.

“Sending someone to a shelter is always a challenge because shelters are often full,” she explained. “A local shelter would provide a safe place to go, but we realize that this is going to take money. Taxes have to be paid, as well as deposits, rent, and utilities. At present, money just is not there for a fully staffed shelter.”

She said that a shelter shared by abuse victims and the county’s homeless population might offer a solution. Willow Tree will work closely with Posey Awareness Toward Humanity (PATH) to explore that possibility.

“The homeless population in the county is bigger than people realize,” Baro pointed out. “People often sleep in alleys, sheds, and abandoned houses. Some folks hop from house to house. Individuals released from jail often need a place to stay. Some kind of transitional shelter could go a long way toward solving this problem.”

Other services Willow Tree offers include crisis and community outreach through distribution of brochures, participation in community events, and networking with

other social service organizations. Short-term goals include updating technology, recruiting volunteers, and holding fundraising events. Willow Tree will hold a fundraiser in May, and it will be among twenty-six organizations participating in the annual Walk for Dreams along the riverfront in Evansville.

“We’d like to focus on the rebirth, rebranding, and recruitment so that our new strategic plan has a firm foundation to grow on, “ said Alice Shen, president of Willow Tree’s board of directors.

“Community involvement is important and necessary as we grow, whether that involvement be through volunteering, donating, or joining the board, said Shen, who joined the board five years ago.

“I first got involved to volunteer for the cause of domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy,” she said. “But in my time on the board, I’ve learned so much more about running a nonprofit and leading a community organization.”

David Campbell, an ardent supporter and underwriter for Willow Tree, called Willow Tree “an under-funded and under-supported resource.”

“I support all they do to assist women in need,” said Campbell.. “Willow Tree deserves community’s support as well.”

