

# Planting Seeds of Hope



by Britney Naolhu

When I was six, my kindergarten teacher gave all her students a little seed. We were told to plant it in a little pot and place it by the window of our classroom. Each day, I watered and logged the growth of my seed. I watched as it slowly sprouted, growing only a couple of centimeters each week. The process was quite long and at times it didn't seem like it was making any progress. As an eager six year old, the anticipation consumed me – I didn't care much for the growth process, I just wanted to see the flower. After weeks of suspense, the seed grew into what became a beautiful flower. I was amazed that a little seed could create such a precious thing.

A couple of months ago, I was seated at a table with my coworkers. I had reached into a gift bag and pulled out a packet of flower seeds. Attached to that packet was a note that read “**Planting Seeds of Hope.**” As I gazed at the note, two women walked onto the stage across from me and began speaking through the microphone. They seemed pretty cheerful but there was a sense of nervousness from them. I listened as they shared a story of their mother, who I could tell was a person that many people adored. Their mother sat near the very front of the stage and the two women were admiring her as their voices began to crack and their eyes began to fill with tears.

“My mother was a victim of sexual abuse,” one of the women said.

At this point, the hundreds of people that surrounded me were in tears, including me. I squeezed the packet of flower seeds trying to fight back the

tears and continued to listen. This story wasn't just any story – it was the story of a sexual abuse survivor.

Sexual abuse is a growing issue that not only affects women, but also men and children of all ages. It can not be easily resolved by reporting an instance or fighting it through the criminal justice system. Sexual abuse leaves long-lasting emotional effects on victims. At times, it's difficult for them to feel like they have a voice. It takes away a piece of their identity and makes them feel as if they are worthless and have no power or control. As a result of this, many people fear for their safety. Although our efforts to combat sexual abuse are certainly increasing, there is still a lingering problem within our community and society: many people are not aware of how serious the issue is. The effect sexual abuse has on both our bodies and mind can leave lasting scars that eventually lead to long-term depression and anxiety. Our bodies are our identities. They give us individuality among the 7.5 billion people walking this earth and the 323.1 million people in America. Individuality is what drives America to be innovative and collaborative. The combination of ideas that stem from our identities help create a diverse, yet unified nation. America can not stand strong without everyone feeling like they are safe, meaningful, and have control of their own identity. It is our duty to not forget about those who are in need of emotional help.

Issues like sexual abuse is the reason why I sat in that chair holding a packet of seeds. I had been drawn by many survivor stories that I eventually found myself at Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center working with the Development Team. ZCenter is a non-profit organization located in Gurnee and Skokie, IL aimed to serve the community by fighting against sexual assault and abuse. I could not have been more blessed to be a part of that community.

As a part of the Development Team, I was responsible for planning fundraising events to raise awareness for sexual abuse. During my work here, I have solicited for donations, as well as helped put together items for major events called the Race to Zero 5K and the Annual Community Luncheon. Both

events help bring together the community in order to raise awareness and money for our survivors and facility. In preparation for the 5K, I worked closely with my coordinator, Rachael Josephsen, to assemble race packets for the participants, as well as distribute them.

In preparation for the luncheon, I reached out to local businesses for donations that would be a part of gift baskets at our silent auction. At this event, I helped with the table setups but was mainly in charge of the silent auction table, where I managed the items and assisted anyone in need of help. Following this was the lunch, where many guest speakers expressed their gratitude and shared emotional stories. That's where I was. At that moment in the tent, squeezing those flower seeds, I felt that everything I put my time into had paid off. The people surrounding me had come to this event to support a greater cause. That day, we raised over \$70,000 for ZCenter's counseling, advocacy, and

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prevention programs, allowing us to continue to plant seeds of hope.

As a naive six year old, I didn't understand the

process, the responsibility, or time it took to grow a flower. Looking back at it now, that seed was my responsibility. I was told to water it, and although I did, I was too focused on the outcome instead of taking the time to really nourish it. As a wiser seventeen year old, I have learned that the process for raising awareness and hope for victims is much like the growth of a flower. It takes time to flourish and at times there might not seem to be any progress. But, with any flower, it must start with a seed: a single idea of providing support for others who have been sexually assaulted. From here, there must be an agreement for change in order to sprout. Then, comes the influx of support that creates the root. The root is a network of people and organizations that nourish and feed the idea. As the flower continues to grow, a stem will find its way up to hold the idea. With the combination of care, time, people, and love, the seed will grow into a strong, rewarding, bold, and tall-standing flower.