

AROUND THE COUNTY

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SECTION F

BALLOON RELEASE HELD SUNDAY IN BREESE TO REMEMBER THE VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE



An estimated 212 children in south-central Illinois are harmed every day by the cruelty of abuse. A balloon release was held Sunday at Northside Park in Breese to remember these children and to launch a child abuse awareness, education and prevention program in Breese. Organizer and child abuse survivor Tricia McKnight, who is now an advocate for battered spouses and abused children, is pictured (above, far right and in photo at right) dispersing balloons to local citizens who attended the event.

For the children

By Kelly Jo Ross
Breese Journal Reporter

The importance of community involvement to promote the awareness, education and prevention of child abuse was stressed Sunday as part of a balloon release at Northside Park in Breese. The balloon release, which kicked off National Child Abuse Awareness Month, was also held to remember the abused children and to launch a community awareness program in Breese.

Hosting the event were child abuse survivor Tricia McKnight of Breese in conjunction with Dreamcatchers for Abused Children and the city of Breese. An estimated 212 children in south-central Illinois are harmed every day by the cruelty of abuse.

"We need to think about and remember the children being hurt every second of every day, and to let them know that they can reach out to us; they are loved; and they will be protected," McKnight said, adding that her goal is to end the silence that so many abused children and teenagers are forced to face.

McKnight grew up and lived in Freeburg and said that the entire community ignored every sign of her abuse — from the alcoholism, to the beatings, to the neglect. She was never taken to a dentist or doctor. She became the victim of her stepfather from the age of 5 to 17 and then for another 20 years, she was a victim of domestic abuse. It wasn't until she turned 37 that she finally turned her life around.

"There are almost 60 million people like me and most of us don't ever say a word because the people who are abusing us are 95 percent of the time family or guardians who are close to us," McKnight said.

"In 2010, a child was hurt every 4.6 second in Illinois," she said. "DCFS is actually overwhelmed and in 2010, Illinois actually ranked highest in our country of cases because of our economy. When parents get stressed, bad things happen and children are the ones who feel the affect of this."

With community support, McKnight plans to establish a peer support program for local teens giving them a common place where they can go to talk openly about what they are dealing with at home. She said that she spoke to Breese police officer Curt Weh about getting a support system called a "Safety Zone" where kids can meet once a week.

"I don't want a child to be a victim like I was, and I don't want them to rot away," she said.

Another child abuse victim, R. Carl Hart of St. Louis, was one of the 200 men featured on the Oprah Winfrey show last year who had been molested as a child.

Hart told the crowd on Sunday that he was molested when he was 13 years old by a well-known and liked citizen. The perpetrator had "groomed" him, or gained his trust for eight months.

It wasn't until 30 years later, following the discovery of Missouri teenager Shawn Hornbeck who was kidnapped and repeatedly abused by a man who lived three miles away from Hart, that he decided to share his story. Hart admitted that he still experiences trust issues.

Also speaking on Sunday was Linda Walcher, McKnight's fourth-grade teacher at Freeburg, who connected with McKnight after discovering her through a mutual friend on Facebook. Walcher had clicked on McKnight's Facebook page and read that she was an author. After reading the first couple of chapters of McKnight's book, "My Justice," available online at Amazon.com, Walcher was stunned.

"I had no idea that Tricia had been molested, abused and neglected, and she was my fourth-grade student," Walcher said. "That gives you an example of how silent these children can be, and if you are not alert and aware, they can slip right past you. I was sick. I didn't know what happened."

Walcher sent McKnight a Facebook message and wrote, "I'm sorry. I didn't know." The two met and reconnected just a couple of months ago.

"I made a promise to Tricia that maybe I didn't know back then, but I would do anything that I can to support her now, and I will do anything to make others aware of the silent signs," she said.

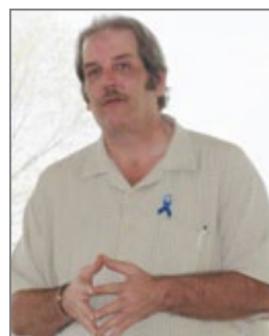
McKnight stressed that people should watch for the changes in children around them, including problems at school, and encouraged everyone to get more involved with their community.

"Spread human kindness and awareness of others," McKnight said. "Eventually we can help save the lives of many children and instead of the numbers going up, maybe we can make a difference and the numbers will start going down."

Anyone interested in contacting McKnight or learning more about the program, can call her at (618)526-9114 or visit www.facebook.com/tricia62.



Five white balloons were released to represent the five children who die every day nationwide at the hands of abuse.



Child abuse survivor R. Carl Hart of St. Louis talked about his own experiences and the "Just Tell" program.



Breese Mayor Charlie Hilmes spoke about the importance of community involvement in spreading awareness about child abuse.



Breese Boy Scout Troop #225 and its leaders were recognized for their participation in the 911 Cell Phone Recycle Program which assists victims of domestic violence who need access to private phones connecting them to 911 services.



At right: Linda Walcher (left), who was Tricia McKnight's fourth-grade teacher, spoke about how children live in constant fear and hide the serious crimes committed against them.

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