'Clothesline' focuses awareness on abuse victims

By Erin Smith
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Scores of T-shirts hanging on clotheslines were strung throughout the East Lounge of Purdue University’s Memorial Union last week.

Two bulletin boards were covered with traced handprints — "These hands don’t hurt.”

The Clothesline Project, an annual nationwide program, was on display as part of Intimate Violence Prevention Week.

Joanna Smelson, a senior from Lafayette majoring in youth, adult and family services, said she was given an assignment to write a one-page reflection paper about one of the T-shirts.

"It intrigued me,” she said of the shirt she chose. "It had some depth to it. The message wasn’t blatant. It made me stop and think. (But) this isn’t something I really want to think about."

The human tendency to avoid acknowledging rape, child molestation and domestic violence is understandable but harmful, said Rev. Betty Arnold, interim associate minister at Federated Church of West Lafayette.

Arnold, 45, said awareness is key to prevention, and that’s why the Clothesline Project is important.

"I was raped for the first time when I was six,” she said. "People just don’t want to believe it. If we don’t believe it, then kids can’t get help.”

More than 100 shirts were on display in this year’s project. Victims of domestic violence, or those who know victims, created T-shirts with messages, thoughts and pictures about their experiences.

Karen Hall, director of Purdue Women’s Resource Office, said the number of T-shirts hanging in the Memorial Union increases each year.

"And throughout the week, people add their designs," she said.

The Clothesline Project began in 1990 in Massachusetts with just 31 T-shirts. Since then, it has blossomed into a nationwide program with more than 100,000 shirts.

Hall said hundreds of people viewed the color-coded T-shirts.

"This happened to real people,” Smelson said. "It almost puts a face to it. It kind of helped with the reality of it.”

"Many of the shirts were red, representing women who were raped or sexually assaulted."

According to the U.S. Justice Department, more than one woman in America is raped every single minute.

Anita Carpencher, of the Indiana Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said one in four women will have forced sex or a forced sex encounter. The average age of the victims is 16.5 years, she said.

"That’s why we’re targeting college students,” said Carpenter.

Purdue police reported 22 sexual assaults on campus in 2002. Since July, police responded to three rapes, one sex offense and 10 batteries or assaults.

Cheryl Elbehor, executive director of the Lafayette Crisis Center, said local organizations started putting together the Clothesline Project at Purdue five or six years ago.

"As soon as we started pulling people together, more and more people came out of the woodwork,” she said.

Cindy Adkins, a senior from Indianapolis majoring in elementary education, volunteered for two hours at the project.

"I think abuse is a very important issue that both men and women should be educated about,” said Adkins.

Events during the week included speakers, seminars, a film night and a march around campus.

By John Turturco/Journal and Courier

TAKING NOTE: Evan Leslie, 21, looks over the T-shirts in The Clothesline Project in the Purdue Memorial Union to get ideas for a paper he has to write for his health and safety class.

Contributing: David Smith/Journal and Courier