Shedding an intimate light on Domestic Violence Awareness Month

In honor of National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, the Clackamas Community College Wilsonville campus will be featuring a collection of paintings entitled, “What Silence Sounds Like” throughout the month of October. As a survivor of domestic violence, the artist of the collection, Jennifer Whitten, is using painting to start a conversation about the subject of domestic violence and the culture of silence surrounding it.

Having painted since her childhood, it wasn’t until Whitten, 27, began studying art therapy at Clackamas Community College that she became serious about her art. After getting out of a long-term relationship with an abusive partner and the father of her eight-year-old son, Whitten connected with the idea of expressing her emotions through art.

“I’ve been calling this collection a ‘visual memoir’ because it is meant to capture moments, memories and emotions from my own experience in an abusive relationship,” Whitten said. “As a survivor of abuse, I am keenly aware of the silence surrounding domestic violence.”

For Whitten, the silence began when she was 17 years old. Just three months into the relationship, things took a turn for the worse and became abusive. After seven years, Whitten came to a breaking point and knew that she had to get out.

“I had money, a place to go and a safety net,” she said. “I had people willing to back me up.”

That safety net and a group of people being aware of her circumstances was the first step toward her and her son creating a new life — something that Whitten said many in domestic violence situations don’t have because it’s complicated to wade through the complex cocktail of love and abuse, leaving yourself vulnerable by opening up to others.

It’s been three years since Whitten and her son managed to escape domestic abuse and through the healing process she found that art therapy helped her process and move forward, saying that that art has always been helpful in sorting and expressing her emotions. But it wasn’t until the summer of 2016 — when she started to verbally write a memoir — that she found herself pulling out her sketchbook to convey emotions that words failed to describe, which became the foundation for “What Silence Sounds Like.”

“I felt like this is something that I needed to say” she said, “and it felt like the right time.” Encouraged by her professor Dave Andersen, Whitten took a big, bold move with her art and began her collection, incorporating found objects into her pieces. She went through what she calls a process of destroying and rebuilding the objects—from broken framing to torn materials — until she can feel satisfied.

“It’s been completely organic where I’ll be driving and I have to pull over and make a note then I’ll look back and be like ‘What? What was I trying to say?’” she laughed. Because of this slightly hectic and creative process, her father — who is also an artist — comes in to help Whitten decide when her pieces are finished. But despite her dedication to her pieces and conveying the powerful nature of her subject matter, Whitten is careful about balancing her separation and involvement levels with her work. “It’s not easy and it can still be a difficult place to access — it’s a place that I visit but I don’t want to live there,” she said. “While I don’t want to set up shop and live here, I can go on strategic missions and help people who also don’t want to live there.”
Whitten wants her work to help facilitate conversations about domestic violence and to encourage people to speak out against threatening behavior. “It’s happening where we work, go to school, play, right next to us,” she said. “Don’t let it be something that hides in the corner. We need to know it’s happening.”

For Whitten, it’s all about education, acceptance and being a voice for those silenced or afraid to speak out for themselves.

“Statistically, 1 in 3 women will be abused physically by an intimate partner,” said Whitten. “There is a strong possibility that there is someone that every one of us know that is suffering in the silence, and an abuser who is benefiting from it.”

Through her own experience at the hands of an abusive partner, she said that she wants people to know that domestic abuse isn’t an isolated problem and that the solution is not turning a blind-eye and deaf-ear to the problem.

“It’s good to get to the point where we ask what can we do, because that’s where change can happen,” Whitten said. “If there was not silence, there would be no abuse.”

To play her part, Whitten said that she’s happy even if her pieces only spark a conversation around domestic violence between a few students because you never know who you could be helping just by listening and being accepting and engaged.

In the future, Whitten hopes to continue to use art to promote health and healing through a career in art therapy. With her unique combination of experiences and background, she feels confident that she will be able to meet people where they’re at.

“I can talk that talk,” she said, “because I have walked the walk.”

Contact Claire Colby at 503-636-1281 or ext. 113 ecolby@pamplinmedia.com