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Abuse Issue Brought to Fore

By DELANIA TRIGG, Assistant Editor [Gainesville Daily Register](#)

Gainesville — The Cooke County courthouse has a sobering visual on its west lawn — a display recognizing local child abuse victims.

Staff members and volunteers from Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) set up the courthouse visual to coincide with Child Abuse Awareness month, marked nationally each April.

The exhibit includes blue paper hearts stamped with children's handprints and a handmade wooden sign.

CASA executive director Vicki Robertson said she hopes the display sparks some attention.

"Every year what we try to do is create this visual, and I think if you see the number, you understand that these are real children," Robertson said. "Our hope in the display is that people will understand that abuse is happening here and it effects little girls and little boys that they've seen in this community. It affects the kids down the street, the kids at school with your kids and grandkids. It may sound graphic but this is real blood. It's real tears."

Robertson said the latest information available indicates 92 Cooke County children were so severely abused and neglected in 2011 they required protective custody.

Sadder still, Robertson said, is a small teddy bear among the blue hearts.

"That one teddy bear symbolizes a child who didn't make it into CPS custody," Robertson said. "That is a child who lost their life." Child abuse affects more than the families directly involved in the abuse, she added, pointing out child abuse has been shown to correlate with other social ills.

"The thing I wish people knew is that even if it's not in your family it is affecting all our futures," Robertson said. "What it costs us financially and the damage to people's lives is astronomical. Many times abuse victims come into our prison systems or get into drug abuse or become victims of domestic violence. The problem that we have is multi-faceted. It's not just the bruises. It's the long-term ramifications of abuse."

Above all, Robertson said the courthouse display is a sad reminder of some of the county's most vulnerable residents.

"Really, our goal in that little display was to remember these children and to cause our community to pause and think about them."

In addition, Cooke County commissioners approved a proclamation Monday declaring April "Child Abuse Awareness Month."

As local child advocates and others work to raise awareness of child abuse issues this month, author and speaker Theresa Westbrook continues to educate and inform individuals and offer hope and comfort to victims.

Westbrook — who operates Pearls of Shalom Ministries — said the most destructive aspect of child abuse is secrecy.

"I really believe 95 percent of child abuse can be prevented if people start speaking up about it," she said.

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse, Westbrook shares her story in her book "A Strand of Pearls."

She also produced a DVD on abuse issues and travels the country speaking about abuse prevention and healing. Her second book, "The Advocates of the Abused and Silent" is a compilation of survivor stories.

Westbrook said she's found some unsettling statistics.

"One in three females will be abused by the age of 18," she noted. "For males that number is one in five by the time they are 18."

It's wrong to view child abuse as isolated incidents that happen only in certain circles, she continued.

"When you're in a restaurant just look around," she said. "There are survivors but there is also someone who is an abuser."

Westbrook said one of her goals is to educate others about abuse. She also offers tips for individuals who suspect a child is being abused.

"Stay calm, don't make any comments and encourage the child to talk freely," she said. "If the abuse has just happened, seek medical attention and call the authorities. Tell them you believe them and that they did the right thing telling you. Tell them they are not to blame."

Talking about abuse is often cathartic even years about the abuse ends, Westbrook said. She credits faith with helping abuse victims such as her find peace.

"When people come forward to share their stories, they can receive healing and restoration," she said. "A lot are adults and yet they're still suffering. Thanks to the Lord I've been able to bring them hope."

Westbrook also advocates vigilance when it comes to reporting child abuse.

"If we see something we should call," she said. "There is nothing wrong with a good faith effort to report a valid concern.

Don't feel guilty about calling in and having someone look into it. When people keep silent abuse is allowed to continue."

For information on Westbrook's ministry visit pearlsofshalom.com.