

This Is Your Story, How Do We Tell It?

Finding our Voice: Sister Survivors Exhibit at the MSU Museum

By Adam Austad

Silence is golden in almost every scenario except for this one. When bodies are taken not given. When consent is no longer an option. For 505 women, their pictures aligned in rows of vibrant glass tiles, their voices were taken from them. MSU Museum was giving them back.

On April 16th, the MSU Museum unveiled its co-curated Finding our Voice: Sister Survivors Exhibit to showcase the historical significance and impact of sexual assault. The most nuanced aspect of the exhibit was the inclusion of the community in the process of making it. The space served as a testament to the lives that were impacted by the perpetrator, Larry Nassar, presented by those very people.

“I believe that museums should be a place for dialogue and address events that are happening locally, nationally and internationally,” said Mary Worrall, curator of textiles at the MSU Museum. “Historically, museum’s haven’t always been the best at thinking about how they are representing things, how they are exhibiting things or what stories they are telling.”

In close collaboration with Parents of Sister Survivors Engaged, a committee advisory group consisting of the survivors and the parents of the perpetrator, the MSU Museum started the process of collection in the summer of the previous year. Through a practice known as rapid response collecting, a method of extracting present-day history, the museum set out to obtain modern-day relics like the teal bows that clung to the ancient trees of MSU.

“The bows were meant to testify to the campus community, to provide a visual cue that the damage done was vast, in numbers too great to understand without somehow seeing it,” said Valerie von Frank, mother of sister survivor Grace French. “The work of tying them became a meditation of sorts — penance, prayer, and a promise that we will not let any survivor go unacknowledged.”

The gallery on the first floor of the MSU Museum was separated into two distinct physical spaces. The first room represented the dark theme of the social justice issue which displayed tiles representing the survivors, a wall illustrating the numerous after-effects of sexual violence and a timeline of depicting the negligence of the institutional actors. The second room represented the lighter theme which featured re-created trees adorned with teal ribbons, a sculpture made of 300 tie-dyed silk butterflies, and narratives of heroic activism.

“There is not a magical force that can right these wrongs ... Time does not automatically heal,” said a survivor in a victim impact statement. “Evil does not recede on its own. It must be overcome and forced into retreat. **We all have an obligation to be part of that force that will bring forth change, both here in this courtroom and out there where there is still so much work to be done.**”

It was difficult not to get emotional as one walked through the openness of the exhibit. Whether it was fighting back tears, feeling gut wrenching agony or finding hope in the resilience the Finding our Voice; Sister's Survivors Exhibit represented the worst and best of humanity. By displaying the varying dimensions of sexual violence through art, the exhibit created a space of healing and served as a symbol of metamorphosis.

WC: 512

PN: MSU Museum, Finding our Voice, Sisters Survivors Exhibit, #MeToo, Larry Nassar, Mary Worrall, Valerie von Frank, Grace French, Parents of Sister Survivors Engaged,

Great work Adam! Only a few edits from me! - Helen

Very well written, could picture and feel it. - Logan