“This exhibit is wonderful, very evocative of the despair and strength of surviving sexual assault...in ways beyond words.”

--comment by visitor to the exhibit

The Art of Surviving sexual violence

Stories of victimization and healing told by survivors of sexual violence through their own artwork and poetry.
The Art of Surviving is an exhibit of artwork and poetry created by survivors of sexual violence across Virginia. The art and poetry provide survivors, many of whom have felt silenced in their victimization, a voice with which to discuss sexual victimization and healing and to speak out about the realities of sexual violence and survivorship through artistic expression.

Art has long been used as a means for evoking or expressing emotion, encouraging dialogue, providing social commentary, promoting healing, and stimulating social change. The Art of Surviving exhibit harnesses the power of survivors’ art and poetry to raise public awareness about the prevalence and scope of sexual violence, its impact on individuals, families, and communities, and the process of moving from victim of sexual violence to survivor.

“There are no words to describe what it feels like to be raped...in my art, I found my voice.”

--contributing artist to the Art of Surviving

The contributing Artists and Poets

The Art of Surviving asks survivors to teach us (through their art and poetry) about what sexual violence is and how it affects individuals, families, and communities. It rightly frames survivors as the experts.

These experts, our contributing artists and poets, range in age from 19 to 75. They are college students, great-grandparents, military veterans, activists, artists, therapists, crisis center staff and volunteers, and self-defense instructors. Some of the artists created their art and poetry shortly after they were assaulted; some created it over 40 years later. A few created their artwork and poetry while staying in a domestic violence shelter or participating in a sexual assault support group. A few are professional artists. Many created their artwork on their own.

All have chosen to use their artwork and poetry to communicate to the public through this exhibit what it means to survive and heal from sexual violence.
Contributing artists and poets are asked to submit a written narrative that is displayed alongside each piece to describe how their work relates to surviving sexual violence. Here are two examples of artwork and narratives that are part of the more than 30 pieces in The Art of Surviving collection.

**Artist Narrative**

**Title:** Scream  
**Artist:** Anonymous  
**Age when I was sexually assaulted:** 19  
**Age when I created this piece:** 24  

“Scream” grew out of years of therapy for depression. A small sketch evolved into this painting during a dark and painful time as I was working through the trauma of a college acquaintance rape. A pregnancy resulted, and abortion was illegal in the United States at the time. A college chaplain helped me find a New York doctor who went to Puerto Rico once a month to perform safe abortions. It was a terrifying experience that I endured alone.

I had blocked out the pain and fear until this painting emerged from deep inside, and I was finally able to cry and scream for the betrayal and losses. With lots of help from a caring therapist and the support of loving women friends, I recovered my ability to trust and be intimate again. My life’s work has been dedicated to helping women and children recover from violence. Giving to others helped me heal.

**Artist Narrative**

**Title:** Rapture  
**Artist:** Gerry Mitchell  
**Age when I was sexually assaulted:** 7  
**Age when I created this piece:** 53  

As an incest survivor, I have managed to forgive and continue with my life anyway. I am very happy and finally at peace with the world. All of my life experiences have helped mold me into a very optimistic being. My paintings reflect the joy of being alive and still in awe of what life can bring.
Submit your Work

We collect art and poetry on an ongoing basis from sexual violence survivors (18 years and older) interested in participating in the Art of Surviving exhibit. Paintings, charcoals, drawings, poetry, collages, and any other media that can hang on a wall are all eligible.

If you wish to submit anonymously, we will keep your name confidential. We ask that you submit contact information for our records so we can contact you, if needed. Your name will not appear on the exhibit unless you want it to appear. Please visit www.artofsurviving.org or call our office for a submission form.

“Beautiful artistic expressions of survival—an excellent means of breaking the silence and breaking free.” --comment by visitor to the exhibit

Host an Exhibit

The Art of Surviving exhibit was created to raise awareness in a public setting, and to encourage individuals and communities to think about and discuss the nature and effects of sexual violence, the spiritual aspects of violence and healing, and what we can do to end sexual violence.

Affiliate and Sexual & Domestic Violence Advocacy members of the Action Alliance, including Sexual Assault Crisis Centers, campus sexual assault programs, local coordinating councils, and others may reserve the project to display locally. If you are not a member, you are invited to partner with a member agency. Please contact the Action Alliance or visit www.artofsurviving.org for more information on how to host the exhibit.

The Art of Surviving is a project of the Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance, a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations working to end sexual and domestic violence, in collaboration with MettaKnowledge for Peace.

Please visit The Art of Surviving website for more information.

www.artofsurviving.org