

PostSecrets on view at Kennesaw State University

By Wendell Brock
For the AJC

Everybody has a secret lurking somewhere in the closet of their soul. Frank Warren harbors a half-million of them.



Ben Poplin reads anonymous secrets in the PostSecret exhibit at Kennesaw State University. For the project, people submit notes revealing their deepest secrets.

Since 2004, total strangers have scribbled their most intimate thoughts on postcards and dispatched them to his home in Germantown, Md., courtesy of his ongoing community art project, PostSecret, which asks participants to share their thoughts anonymously.

A cultural phenomenon that transcends the avalanche of mail piled up in his home, PostSecret has become a high-traffic Internet destination for the hip and heartbroken (postsecretcommunity.com) and seems to have special resonance with young people. Warren's collection of postcards from the edge has made him a hot ticket on the college-lecture circuit, spawned five books (including the recent No. 1 New York Times best seller "PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death and God") and provided the material for a number of gallery exhibitions (including one at Kennesaw State University through March 27).

"I always knew it would be special and precious for me, if I could create a safe nonjudgmental place where people could share their deepest hopes and fears and private jokes (or) sexual peccadilloes," said Warren, who posts 10 new secrets to his blog each Sunday and contributes proceeds to the National Suicide Prevention hot line. "But the way it's really exploded not just across the country but around the world was something I could have never expected."

At Kennesaw State's Sturgis Library, visitors can wander through an archive of pain and despair, sadness and melancholy, hope and joy, sarcasm and vitriol. Loneliness lingers in the margins of many of the 400 mysterious and artfully decorated cards, the quest for love as plain and indelible as the postmarks. "I think the very act of sharing a secret, whether it's whispering it into a best friend's ear or putting it on postcard, can be transformative," Warren said. "It can change who you are."

"I still drink out of my dead son's sippy cup," says one poignant missive, pinned on a wall at the university library. "It doesn't make it any easier."

"I made a student repeat a grade so I could flirt with his father one more year," says another, shocking in its perversity.

"My landlord kept my \$200 damage deposit," writes one embittered soul. "I kept his \$2,000 chandelier."

"Secrets are typically of a darker or negative nature, because I think when we have good news about ourselves we look to tell people," said Warren, who lives at the PostSecret mailing address — 13345 Cooper Ridge Road, Germantown, Md. 20874 — with his wife and 15-year-old daughter. "Each of us has a secret that could break your hearts, if you just knew what it was."

In a glass case at Kennesaw, there's a dingy pink ballerina slipper mailed by a woman who quit dancing after a teacher told her she wasn't good enough; a condom wrapper from a person who claims to stick pins through drugstore prophylactics; a crushed videotape from a secret-sharer who finds it painful to watch his childhood videos.

Warren, 45, calls himself an “accidental artist” because he has no formal training. (He has a degree in social science from the University of California at Berkeley and is the former owner of a document-delivery service.) His fascination with postcards began in elementary school, when his mother gave him some self-addressed cards to send from summer camp. Shortly after returning home, he opened the mailbox to find one of his own notes. It felt like magic.

In 2004, his “reluctant oracle” project made newspaper headlines, after mysterious hand-shaped messages began turning up in bottles he released at Maryland’s Clopper Lake, in the state park where part of “The Blair Witch Project” was filmed. Warren refused to reveal himself as the source of the cryptic messages, speaking to The Washington Post under the pseudonym “Hobby Horse.”

Later that year, he started PostSecret, printing 3,000 self-addressed postcards asking people to jot down a secret and mail it to him. He gave the cards to strangers and left them in public places. The response was meager – until he created his blog. Now he gets about 1,000 PostSecrets a week. The pop-band All American Rejects used PostSecret images in its “Dirty Little Secret” music video. People even tuck their messages into PostSecret titles on bookstore shelves.

“The most common kind of secret I get comes from a person somewhere on that journey of trying to find that one person they can tell all their secrets with,” Warren said. “I also get a lot of secrets from people confessing to pee in the shower. You get the full breadth here, from the deeply philosophical and meaningful to the trivial and laugh-out-loud funny.”

Visual arts exhibit

“PostSecret”

Through March 27. The Art Gallery at Sturgis Library, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, Kennesaw. Free. 770-499-3223, kennesaw.edu/arts/galleries/