

'PostSecret' phenomenon hits Bridgeport's HMA

By Phyllis A.S. Boros, STAFF WRITER | 07/24/2009

If you were offered the opportunity to share one of your darkest secrets in a very public -- albeit anonymous -- way, would you take it?

And would anyone be interested in reading it?

As Frank Warren knows, the answers are "yes" and "yes." Absolutely, "yes."

Warren is the creator of "PostSecret," an "ongoing community art project" in which participants state their innermost thoughts on a postcard and then send it anonymously to Warren. From the piles Warren receives each week, he chooses 20 to post on his Web site every Sunday afternoon.

And should you be wondering about the numbers: At his suburban Washington, D.C., home, Warren receives about 1,000 postcards each week -- more than a quarter-million since the project began in 2004. And as of last week, more than 252 million people had visited PostSecret.blogspot.com -- about 1 million doing so every week.

In November 2004, as part of a project for an art exhibition, Warren distributed postcards to passersby on street corners and in stacks left at such public places as commuter Metro stations in and around the capital, asking that one secret be written on each postcard and that it be returned to his home address. The criteria: the secret had to be true, and it had to be something that had never been shared with anyone. In addition to text, each card could be embellished with drawings, watercolors or the like, or created from photographs, old invitations, pieces of cardboard or whatever else sprang to mind.

That request would spark an international phenomenon that continues to this day, resulting in a slew of newspaper and magazine articles around the world, a series of "PostSecret" books from HarperCollins and touring postcard exhibitions, curated by Warren, throughout the United States.

On Aug. 3, an exhibition of about 400 of these artful handmade postcards opens at Housatonic Community College's Housatonic Museum of Art, where it will remain on view through Sept. 13. The Bridgeport visit, which is the only New England stop on this national tour circulated by International Arts & Artists of Washington, D.C., is being funded by the Werth Family Foundation of Woodbridge.

"A healer of souls" is the way HMA Director Robbin Zella describes the 45-year-old Warren.

"The reason that this project has resonated so deeply is that we all have secrets," noted Zella, adding that the exhibition reflects all the sorrow and joy of the human experience, proving that art created "in the here and now can be powerful and have value."

To celebrate the exhibition, a free reception is planned in the HMA's Burt Chernow Galleries on Aug. 27 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Although Warren is unable to attend the reception, he will visit the college on Sept. 10 to present a lecture on the project and to sign copies of his books: "PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives," with more than a quarter-million copies in print; "My Secret," featuring the secrets of young people; "The Secret Lives of Men and Women"; and "A Lifetime of Secrets." His fifth book, "PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death and God," is scheduled to be published on Oct. 6. (Details on Warren's visit here have yet to be finalized.)

In a recent telephone chat from his home, Warren said the public's response to his project continues to inspire, awe and amaze him.

"Helping to spread the word that hope and help is out there" is a source of great satisfaction for Warren, who pointed out that his project has helped to "raise awareness and money" -- more than \$500,000 -- for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (toll free

800-SUICIDE), for which Warren has volunteered over the years.

And it also has "provided meaning in my own life in surprising ways."

Warren, an Arizona native who went to high school in Illinois and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in social sciences, said his adolescence and early adult life were full of "pain, suffering and loneliness."

The project, however, has helped him "to make sense" of that time, which he was "unable to [do] while living through it chronologically, while in the moment.

"There are two kinds of secrets, the ones we keep from others, and the ones we have kept to ourselves," said Warren, a self-described "accidental artist" with no formal training.

"And amazingly, the project has demonstrated that for some people ... that the sharing of a secret can be the first step" in dealing with difficult life experiences. "It can be transformative, allowing you to become a different person."

The "PostSecret" postcards prove that "artistic training and talent may not be as important as courage to create enduring works," Warren believes.

"There are many things that have come out of this project that I could have not anticipated. It has tapped into a mysterious and wonderful thing: There is an artist inside all of us."

Indeed, the postcards present a gamut of human emotions, from sadness, fear, desire, regret and

desolation to whimsy, hope and wonder. Some are enormously funny; some are almost too painful to read. Many are extraordinarily compelling. Victims of incest and rape share their secrets; details of failed love affairs are frequently offered. Creative thought and artistic flair abound.

In his collection is a "Thank You" note, depicting a pink floral bouquet that's tied with a pink bow, with these words: "everytime i work up the nerve to swallow the pills, someone does something to make me want to live and i've never said thank you for saving my life. people have no idea how far kindness can go. i'm living proof."

One, with a Honolulu postmark, shows details from a beautiful woman's gown, with the message: "I married someone I don't love because I wanted to wear the dress."

On the lighter side, there are ones like this: "I don't care about recycling. (but i pretend i do.)"

Another postcard that depicts a Starbucks coffee logo, declares: "i give decaf to customers who are RUDE to me!"

A message on an unattractive photo of an aging Liz Taylor points out that: "All my life I wanted to look like liz taylor. Now liz taylor is starting to look like me."

Although Warren's decision to focus on postcards in his project may seem unusual to some, it makes perfect sense to him. "I've always had this connection with postcards. When I was in the fourth grade, I went away to church camp and my mother gave me three self-addressed postcards. On the day before coming home, I sent out the last of the postcards."

Warren made it home before that card. "And that broke the world open for me ... wondering about all kinds of things. Was I the same person who sent it? How had I changed?"

"PostSecret" has brought Warren a "deep contentment" and a "greater sense of empathy with people." For Warren, "it feels really good" knowing that his books, exhibitions and Web site offer comfort to those who may be hurting.

"I just want them to know that they are not alone."

To participate in

"PostSecret," send a postcard to Frank Warren, 13345 Copper Ridge Road, Germantown MD 20874. His Web site, which is updated every Sunday afternoon, is:

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