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## Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through Body Adornment

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Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma through  
Body Adornment

Linore Huss

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College  
at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for graduation with  
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My honors project consists of a series of interviews with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder survivors or their family members and an interactive body of work in body adornment and jewelry that reflects their stories. Last year I decided to focus on the people behind the trauma rather than the trauma itself, which I feel connects the survivor and the viewer more deeply than presenting a general image. Each piece draws from a survivor, the titles pulling from interview quotes, and the interaction with the viewer representative of each personal struggle.

At each step of the process, I checked with the survivors to make sure that they approved of what I was doing and that I was representing them honestly. Some chose to be anonymous, some chose to share their first name, some told me details that I shouldn't include, some were closed off, some were completely open, some concerned about their relationships or family if anyone saw it, some were comfortable with being quoted and some not. Whatever their preferences were, I did my best to honor them, always straying on the side of anonymity.

The hardest part of this project for me was the sometimes paralyzing fear that I would mess it up, that I would hurt one of the people I talked to with a careless remark, or that I would represent them incorrectly or emphasize the parts of the story that they considered less important and leave out the most influential. I countered this by speaking with a psychologist about the project; the correct ways to phrase requests or questions to leave the power with the survivor, suggesting that they speak with a professional if they wanted my opinion on something, and visiting a psychologist or therapist myself so that I didn't develop what he called "secondary PTSD." I also alleviated some of my concerns over representing those I interviewed correctly by checking with them during the creation of each piece.

The central focus of this project changed partway through its development; originally I was focused on the viewer, on raising awareness and understanding about PTSD. Now, however,

I have found that the most rewarding part of the project is speaking with the survivors and connecting with them without judgement or any ulterior motive. Several of those I interviewed opened up to me about their personal responses to trauma which they asked me not to share for the project or with anyone else. I think it was healing for some of them to have a chance to share their story without my digging for answers or reasons or a different truth.

I began each interview by reminding them that they could choose when to continue or stop, how much to share with me, and which questions to answer. I then asked them to tell me their story. Some asked me “so...what should I start with?” while others jumped right in. Every person, however, started at the beginning, whatever that meant for them, and continued to talk until they had nothing left to say. I didn’t interrupt or ask questions while they were telling their stories, but simply listened and made the occasional affirmative sound. If I didn’t understand part of the story I would ask follow-up questions, but generally didn’t push any further.

I have interviewed five people so far, and have completed three pieces (my goal for this semester). Although I have fulfilled the honors project requirements, I plan to continue with the series next semester. Eventually I would like to move on to other subjects—most likely emotional abuse and bipolar disorder to start with. Hearing individual stories and speaking with survivors was very difficult for me; I had to take several days after each interview to recover from the emotional responses I experienced.

When I shared the stories with my classmates and teacher during critiques there were varying responses—some seemed more able to look at the piece and the story clinically while others had a similar response to my own. Either way, however, each person respected the interviewees enough to take time to look at and wear the piece. While I personally did not understand their ability to separate emotion from viewing, I think the pieces still had the impact I

wanted; we had a dialogue about the survivor and about PTSD which continued outside of class. I hope that display in a gallery setting with the pamphlet I wrote will spark the same questioning and conversation.

## Works Cited

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