

Handbag Line Designed to Bring Awareness to Serious Issue

Wren and Roch founders holding launch party Thursday at The Waterfront Inn in The Villages.

By **CIARA VARONE**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

THE VILLAGES
It started as a typical night of revelry for then-college student Karen Hansen.

About 20 years ago, Hansen went out with some friends. It was dark afterward, so an acquaintance offered to walk her back to her place. Hansen and her friends thought they were ensuring her safety.

"That's how I got raped that night," Hansen said.

Hansen's seemingly well-meaning acquaintance sexually assaulted her, which resulted in a pregnancy, Hansen said. Because she knew her perpetrator, she didn't report it.

On a different day around the same time period, another student, Laura Rachlin, said she was raped by someone she knew. Out of fear of not being believed, she also didn't report it.

But Rachlin and Hansen are using their new business, Wren and Roch, to help break this stigma and join other victims who are speaking out.

They are bringing their handbag line, manufactured in New York and based out of

LAUNCH EVENT

Who: Wren and Roch
When: Thursday for seven one-hour sessions — 9-10 a.m., 10:30-11:30 a.m., 1-2 p.m., 2:30-3:30 p.m., 4-5 p.m., 5:30-6:30 p.m. and 7-8 p.m.

Where: The Waterfront Inn, 1105 Lakeshore Drive, The Villages

Why: To introduce the handbag line and raise awareness about sexual assault and domestic abuse, with a portion of all sales going to victims.

Cost: Free
Details: There will be light refreshments at the event, which is open to the public, but RSVPs are preferred.

Contact: events@wrenandroch.com or 561-620-8185

Boca Raton, to The Villages with a launch party Thursday at The Waterfront Inn at Lake Sumter Landing.

"This happened to us 20 some years ago, and it's still happening today," Rachlin said. "More and more of these cases are really becoming prevalent, and more and more women are speaking out about sexual assault."

After 17 years as best friends and business partners at an interior design firm, Hansen



We can design and we can give back and we can raise awareness.

We can do our part to really create a movement."

LAURA RACHLIN
who has teamed up with Karen Hansen to launch a line of high-fashion handbags with a mission of raising awareness about sexual assault

and Rachlin have teamed up to launch a line of high-fashion handbags with a mission of raising awareness about sexual assault and domestic violence.

Donating to Charities

A portion of all sales is donated to Florida charities championing these causes, including Lauren's Kids, which works to prevent sexual abuse through education, and SafeSpace, which helps victims of domestic violence.

"We can design and we can give back and we can raise awareness. We can do our part to really create a movement," Rachlin said.

The handbag line was born out of the pair's shared love of fashion, but after hearing their stories, a friend suggested they do something more with the business.

Empowering Victims

Telling their own stories, which are available to read at wrenandroch.com, has been a major part of their plan, in the hopes of empowering other victims, many of whom don't speak out. One in five women and 1 in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives, but 63 percent of sexual assaults are not reported to police, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

"You think you must have

done something wrong. You must not have said no loud enough or fought hard enough, so you blame yourself," Hansen said.

In addition to being sexually assaulted, both women said they suffered from domestic abuse years later while running their design firm. Though outwardly it seemed as if their lives were perfect, they said they experienced emotional, verbal and economic abuse at home.

Many people don't understand how domestic abuse can happen, Hansen said. But for some, that abuse can be deadly.

Connie McClain, of the Village of Hadley, became an advocate against domestic violence after her niece, Andrea Will, was murdered in 1998 by her high school boyfriend, whom Will had recently broken up with.

Will was a freshman at Eastern Illinois University, days shy of turning 19, when she was killed. The case eventually led to the enactment of Andrea's law, which established a First Degree Murderer Database in Illinois. McClain, who

will speak at Thursday's event, said she hopes to help others recognize signs of abuse to prevent cases like Will's from recurring.

"I think a lot of times you overlook things when somebody on the surface seems like a nice person. There are a lot of red flags if we had known more. I would like other people to think about that," McClain said. "I want to encourage women to be advocates to their daughters and granddaughters."

Rachlin and Hansen said although speaking up can be difficult, it's worthwhile if it brings hope to others and strengthens the victims. And the designers are happy to be doing something they love.

"Spreading awareness and bringing the fashion aspect into it will be a win-win situation," Rachlin said.

Ciara Varone is a staff writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 753-1119, ext. 9036, or ciara.varone@thevillagesmedia.com.

St. Timothy Catholic Hosting Monthly Collection Thursday

THE VILLAGES
St. Timothy Roman Catholic Church, 1351 Paige Place, will have its monthly clothing, home decor and household goods collection from 7 to 11 a.m. Thursday in the south parking lot. Area thrift stores will bring their trucks, making it convenient for donors to drop off goods typically found in thrift stores. Food and monetary donations also are appreciated.

The profits are used by the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

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Furniture and large appliances also are needed. Questions on the program can be addressed to Bonnie at 674-0094. Call the thrift store at 888-986-4483 to schedule a pick-up.

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