

# ***HOME NEWS TRIBUNE (East Brunswick, NJ)***

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## ***4 Teens Help Peers to Combat Abuse***

By Lisa Vernon-Sparks, Staff Writer

EAST BRUNSWICK: Carrie Speiser stood near her aggressor and trembled as fear and frustration vibrated through her body. Slowly the aggressor walked toward her. In her mind, she vowed never to be hurt, manipulated or controlled by her boyfriend again.

With tears in her eyes, Speiser blocked her face to protect herself from his unpredictable behavior, and took another round of verbal lashings and whatever else.

“I have grown hate for the one person I ever really loved. Fearing his every step, I pray that someone will save me . . . Never again will I go through this cycle. Yet a few days later, it starts again,” Speiser said.

Engaged in a monologue on Tuesday, Speiser, 18, passionately acted out an excerpt from an educational program on cycles of teen-dating violence, which she and three of her best friends - Chinonye Chukunta, 18, Katie Falco, 17, and Shaina Weisbrot, 18 - present to high school students.

The four co-founded an organization called Teens Experiencing Abusive Relationships, or TEAR. Through their personal experiences, interactive exercises and compiled research on teen violence, since last year, the group has gone into high schools around Middlesex County to educate teens about abusive relationships, how to prevent them and how to get out of them, said Speiser.

Today, the four East Brunswick High School seniors will receive an award from New Jersey Child Assault Prevention, a statewide nonprofit agency. The award is given annually in honor of National Child Abuse Awareness Month, which begins today, to individuals who work to prevent child abuse.

The teens literally decided one day last January that enough was enough and they were going to fight back.

“This came from a discussion in the library when we were supposed to be studying for midterms,” Falco said.

The teens began researching statistics and came up with a program that could teach their peers about the cycle of abuse and how to get out of it. The cycle of abuse includes the honeymoon phase, when everything is pleasant; the tension phase, when the victim feels like she is walking on eggshells, and finally the explosion phase, when the abuse actually happens.

“It’s very dramatic to bring the audiences into it,” Speiser said. “We tell about two personal experiences.”

After a first run in April 2003 at what was dubbed “Awareness Day” at East Brunswick High School, the group wanted to expand the program and sought assistance from Women Aware, a Middlesex County agency that provides services to victims of domestic violence and their children, said Kathy Logoyda, community educator for Women Aware.

The teens took a 40-hour training class in domestic violence with the organization this past summer, Logoyda said. The group, under the affiliation of Women Aware, now goes into the schools.

Since starting the program, the teens have made presentations at J.P. Stevens High School, Highland Park High School and Edison Job Corps. They are scheduled to do another “Awareness Day” at East Brunswick High School on April 16, and next month will go to South Amboy Middle/High School.

“I think it’s absolutely amazing. This is the only peer group that is doing this kind of prevention work, peer to peer. They are the only group doing it independently,” Logoyda said.

In the short time the foursome have embarked on this endeavor, they have become experts in the field of teen violence. They quote statistics, such as, one in three teenagers has experienced violence in a dating relationship, according to information obtained from the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Speiser said.

And they can speak with authority on the issue.

“Teenage abuse relationship differs from the adults. We get so much of this isolation,” said Weisbrot, who noted that sometimes friends at school are not allowed to speak with each other during periods of abusive relationships.

“A lot of it is sexual, emotional and verbal abuse. It’s hard to know,” Chukunta said. “There is always another option out there, always an escape.”

Added Speiser: “It’s not all the time noticeable. If you are not friends with the person, you would have no idea.”

“Abuse is not only physical. It’s obvious to others when one walks in with a black eye,” Falco said. “The emotional aspects” are harder to recognize, she said.

NJ CAP is a statewide nonprofit organization that is dedicated to educating the community about preventing peer assault, stranger abduction and known adult assault. According to its mission statement, CAP seeks to integrate the best resources within a community to reduce a child or young person’s vulnerability to verbal, physical and sexual assault.

NJ CAP is affiliated with the Educational Information Resource Center, based in Sewell, and is supported by the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect. Funding comes from the state Department of Human Services.

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