

Women's eNews

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Abuse Survivors Given Free Plastic Surgery

By Sandy Kobrin, WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – What began as the occasional slap in the face early in Jane Delean Burkett's abusive marriage soon led to a broken nose, shattered orbital bone and numerous cuts, bruises and scars.

“A giant roller coaster ride for me just waiting to get off,” is how the 52-year-old factory worker in North Carolina described her 15-year-long abusive marriage. “He slammed my face into the bathroom sink, broke my bones. Then one day he aimed a shot gun at my head; the gun jammed; I ran and never looked back.”

But the years of abuse left a permanent mark.

Delean Burkett said her eyes were drooping and uneven and permanently bruised and discolored. Her nose was a mess; broken, twisted and misshapen. Slashing scars marred her forehead and cheeks. People, she said, had difficulty just looking at her.

“One time I was fired from my factory job because the boss told me I was too hard for people to look at. So one day I was watching one of those plastic surgery shows and I went to my domestic-violence counselor to find out if anything could be done for me and my whole life changed because of the Face to Face program. Those doctors, they are angels.”

Ten years ago, the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery teamed up with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence to create the Face to Face program to provide free plastic surgery to disfigured survivors of domestic violence.

The services – which mainly take the form of facial and dental reconstructions – can be accessed only through domestic violence shelters.

“These women need to heal the emotional scars,” said Rita Smith, executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. “When they're ready, we help them heal the physical scars. Most of these women look years older due to the abuse. Some of these women have lived 20 years in a violent home and it's done so much to the way they look and feel about themselves.”

The program began with 200 doctors in a handful of states. But in the last two years it has grown by leaps and bounds, attracting 120 new doctors to a network that grew from 16 states to 44 states.

Spurred by Makeover Shows

Many say the growth of doctors in the program has been spurred by the same thing that got Delean Burkett thinking about cosmetic surgery for herself; surgical makeover shows on television.

In March the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery released its annual survey, which showed that in 2004 facial plastic surgeons reported a 22 percent rise in cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures compared to the previous year. Doctors participating in Face to Face say that shows such as “Extreme Makeover” and “The Swan” have increased public acceptance of cosmetic surgery and made many plastic surgeons both busy and rich.

But those surgeons also say it has also left some feeling they are garnering criticism for encouraging women to augment their breasts or inject botox instead of loving themselves for who they are.

“We need to let women know plastic surgery is not just for rich Hollywood folks, or a quick fix for something you don’t like,” said Dr. Cynthia Gregg, a plastic surgeon who has been involved in the program since its inception. “It can make a difference in one’s life.”

The operations are not simple face lifts or tummy tucks. They are extensive individualized reconstructive surgeries of faces and mouths that can take months to perform and heal. They often cost tens of thousands of dollars, including fees for using operating rooms and anesthesia. (Often the doctors have contracted their use of operating rooms and include these procedures as part of their agreements. Sometimes they pay the operating room fees themselves.)

Gregg said doctors, in addition to performing and helping pay for the surgeries, also spread the word through personal visits to shelters. “The doctors who do this need to work with the local shelters and go to the women and say ‘Here’s what I can do for you.’”

“I think more surgeons are getting involved in this is because they want to talk about the more positive work they do,” said Smith, of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. “The Face to Face program gives them that opportunity.”

Doctor on the Outreach

Atlanta cosmetic surgeon Dr. William Silver, an initiator of the Face to Face program, takes time off his practice to visit doctors all over the country encouraging them to get involved.

“Young doctors are getting more involved in Face to Face,” Silver said. “We have gotten so lucky in the past few years with the increase in acceptance of cosmetic surgery and its time to give back. This program is the golden opportunity to feel good about your self.”

Silver also credits the makeover shows with opening doors for abused, disfigured women who knew nothing about cosmetic surgery or how it could help them.

“They see on TV what can be done for others and they call their domestic violence shelter and ask, ‘Can this be done for me?’”

In addition to providing complimentary surgery, Face to Face offers counseling and support to help victims break out of the cycle of abuse, enhance their self-esteem and begin to rebuild their lives.

Women who want to inquire about the program should contact a local shelter or the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, based in Boulder, Colo., to begin the process. Requests move to the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, based in Alexandria, Va., which works with counselors at the shelters to screen candidates for the program.

Those accepted for reconstructive surgery must be out of their abusive relationship for at least a year and have been through psychological counseling. The idea is that women’s emotional scars should be healed before the surgery, which generates its own need for physical healing.

Once accepted to the program, a woman may receive either facial and or dental surgery. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence also has an arrangement with Give Back A Smile, a group based in Madison, Wis., run by the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry.

“Each doctor in the program donates their time, skill and operating room time for the individuals involved in domestic violence. But the reward we get is greater than what we give. The personal rewards a patient gives you, you can’t get paid for that,” Silver said.

Silver has done many procedures in his years in the Face to Face program, but is especially proud of the surgery he performed on one particular young woman.

“Her husband beat her in an attempt to make her abort,” he told Women’s eNews. “She had the baby. Her mother helped raise her. When she was healed inside, the domestic violence shelter sent her to me. She went to nursing school and is now an R.N. I feel lucky to have been a part of changing her life.”

Sandy Kobrin is a Los Angeles based writer who specializes in writing about women’s issues and criminal justice.

For more information

American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery – The National Domestic Violence Project – The Face to Face Outreach Programs:

http://www.aafprs.org/patient/humanitarian/pa_ffviolence.html

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