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Because Fear Makes No Class Distinctions – Abuse Support Group Helps Affluent Women End Silent Suffering

By Kim Horner, The Dallas Morning News

Dallas lawyer Julianne Parker used to think that well-educated professional women like her did not become victims of domestic violence.



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Counselor Sandy Gaylord leads People Recovering After Domestic Abuse, a support group for affluent women.

Ms. Parker said she realized how wrong she was after her husband threatened to kill her during their Hawaiian honeymoon. Their marriage ended in March 2004, shortly after she got a protective order and a judge ordered him to complete a battering intervention program.

The 45-year-old bankruptcy attorney was surprised to learn she was not alone when she joined PRADA, a support group of 16 well-educated, affluent women who share stories about abuse, not fashion. Other members include a pediatrician, an engineer and a Highland Park mom.

PRADA stands for People Recovering After Domestic Abuse. The Family Place, a Dallas nonprofit agency that helps domestic violence victims, created the group last year because of a growing number of high-income women seeking help.

Several of the PRADA group members are featured, along with other Dallas women from various backgrounds, in a documentary, *Terror at Home: Domestic Violence in America*, scheduled to air at 10 p.m. today on Lifetime Television.

Their stories defy many people's stereotypes of domestic violence victims.

"Everyone has a picture of what they think a battered woman looks like, and it's not the women in this group," said Paige Flink, executive director of The Family Place. "People think that if you grow up in a family with resources this isn't going to happen to you and that it's so easy for you to leave if you've got money, and that's just not the case."

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that nearly one in three women faces at least one physical assault by a partner during adulthood.

How many out there?

The prevalence of domestic violence has long been a subject of debate among experts, but most agree that it is under-reported to police.



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Nancy of Highland Park had been married to her husband 21 years when she called police for the first time.

"A good education and a good income didn't protect us from domestic violence," Ms. Parker said.

Advocates say, based on their experiences, they believe victims of domestic violence in higher-income families are even less likely to report the abuse. And when police are called, wealthier men can afford legal teams that prevent abuse complaints from becoming a criminal record.

“Based on anecdotal experience, I know that it’s more likely a corporate attorney in an upscale neighborhood is able to keep his name out of a police report than someone who lives in subsidized housing,” said Rita Smith, executive director of the Denver-based coalition.

“I think who gets counted [in the statistics] are the people who can’t afford not to be.”

Nancy, another PRADA group member featured in the Lifetime documentary, said that during mediation of her pending divorce she was asked to sign an agreement not to prosecute her attorney husband for domestic violence. Her husband’s lawyer, Ron Massingill, said no such promise was required.

Nancy, who asked *The Dallas Morning News* not to print her last name, called police on Feb. 20, 2004, from her family’s \$1 million Highland Park home for the first time in her marriage.

She told officers her husband of 21 years had hit her “with an open hand on her right arm, causing her to momentarily fall backwards causing her pain and placing her in fear,” according to a police report.

Nancy “had no physical injuries and refused medical attention,” officers reported.

Her husband “was interviewed and agreed that an argument did escalate to the point that he used force towards his wife. [He] stated that he did grab his wife, but did not strike her,” their report continued.

The next day, Nancy told police “both emotional and physical abuse has been an ongoing problem.” In a recent interview, she said she did not seek help earlier because she was afraid her husband would become more violent and that he would win custody of their children.

“I had a room with a deadbolt lock on it I would lock myself in when I was afraid. He would not let me go into the room that night. I panicked,” she said, referring to the police call. “Nobody realizes how incredibly hard that is to do that to your husband.”

Highland Park Police arrested her husband and charged him with misdemeanor assault, and he spent a night in jail, according the police report. The next day, police got an emergency protective order because Nancy told them she feared retaliation when he was released.

When Nancy went to the police station the following week to be photographed, officers discovered a large bruise on her knee. “The victim stated that she was afraid to tell the officers at the time of the offense,” they wrote in a report.

The husband declined to be interviewed. Ron Massingill, his attorney, said he advised his client not to comment. “This has been a bitter divorce,” Mr. Massingill said. “We have a mediated settlement, and her allegations are false, unfounded and unproven. He’s one of the best fathers I have ever represented.”

Affluent women face great social pressure to keep abuse secret, said Dr. Susan Weitzman, a Chicago therapist who wrote the 2000 book *Not to People Like Us: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages*.

In 2001, she founded the Weitzman Center in Chicago to help women involved in what she calls “upscale violence” and the professionals who serve them. She said these women have fallen through the cracks, and she wants them to be treated like other domestic violence victims.

Dr. Weitzman said five characteristics make upscale violence different from other cases of domestic abuse:

The victims often have not been exposed to any previous domestic abuse.

The victims are usually “go-getters” who see abuse in their relationships as another obstacle to overcome in their marriage.

The victims isolate themselves because they are embarrassed about the abuse, believing the myth that this doesn’t happen to people like them or that they should know better.

The husband has the power to make good on his threats. For example, he can file frivolous lawsuits to drain his wife’s resources.

The husband has such a good reputation in the community that people have a hard time believing abuse occurred.

‘A good life’

“He wears Armani suits. He’s a pillar of the community,” Dr. Weitzman said. “People say ‘You have a good life. What have you got to complain about?’”

Regardless of income levels, domestic violence victims often stay in abusive situations for the same reasons, Ms. Flink said. Many believe they deserve the treatment, or they rationalize that their husband did not mean to hurt them, she said.

In addition, many are afraid their husbands will become more violent or kill them if they leave. Separated women are three times as likely than divorced women and 25 times as likely as married women to be victims of violence by their husbands or partners, reports the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, citing a federal study.

Ms. Parker, 45, said her ex-husband was violent toward her during their 3½-year relationship before they got married. She said she did not call police because she did not consider his actions to be abuse. She had an image of a woman with a black eye when she thought of domestic violence. And the woman in her mind did not look anything like her.

“I was totally convinced it [domestic violence] didn’t happen to people like me,” she said. “Domestic violence victims go to the shelter. I went to the Marriott.”

Ms. Parker credits Sandy Gaylord, a licensed professional counselor who leads the support group, for “saving many of our lives.”

Ms. Gaylord said several of the women she has worked with got into abusive relationships because they grew up with violence at home. Others did not grow up witnessing domestic violence, but, despite being high achievers, had low self-esteem that batterers manipulated, Ms. Gaylord said.

In addition to gathering as a group every Wednesday, members e-mail one another throughout the week. They get together periodically, such as a ceremony shown in the documentary in which they burned photos from their former relationships in an effort to let go of the past. Tonight, they plan to watch the documentary together.

PRADA members said that by telling their stories, they hope other women – from all walks of life – will realize they are not alone and that they, too, can get help. Ms. Parker said although she was reluctant at first, going to the support group showed her that there was a “light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Now I roll my eyes when someone new comes into the group and says ‘I’m not a typical victim of domestic violence,’” she said. “We all roll our eyes and say ‘We didn’t think we were either.’ But we are, because there isn’t a typical victim.”

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