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Break the Silence about Violence; Friends, Co-Workers Can Help Domestic-Abuse Victims

By Susan Felt, *The Arizona Republic*

All Maria Montoya had was a piece of paper with a co-worker's phone number written on it.

But that piece of paper gave her the courage to call 911 on Mother's Day 10 years ago to stop the abuse that had continued for the second straight day.

The second person she called was the co-worker, Geri Martinez.

Martinez, a Head Start teacher, had noticed red marks on the young aide's wrists and neck two months before. She did what domestic-violence counselors recommend: She told Montoya she was concerned about her and asked if anything was wrong. Then she gave Montoya her number.

"You can call me," she had said. "Never stay in a situation you feel is dangerous to you or your son."

Victims of domestic violence usually are silent. They cloak themselves in dark glasses, turtleneck sweaters, guilt and shame. That's why intervention can be so important, and why this week's observance of the national Victims' Rights Week can help shed light on a problem that shame and coercion have kept hidden. Unless someone reaches out, victims frequently endure abuse because they think there's no other choice.

Reaching out, even if only to give someone a number to a domestic-violence hotline, can save someone's life, said Leah Meyers, executive director of services for the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Even convicted abusers have said that someone's getting involved could have helped end the violence.

In Arizona, one in three women is, has been or will be a victim of domestic violence, Meyers said, citing a 1999 report by the Center for Health and Gender Equity and Johns Hopkins University on violence against women around the world. Jodi Jacobson, executive director of the center, said recent data on physical, sexual and psychological abuse of women in intimate relationships corroborate the trend predicted in the report.

Last year, Arizona law-enforcement agencies answered 112,930 calls for domestic assault.

“We need to stop pretending this is some aberration, because it’s so common,” Meyers said. “It happens in a lot of people’s lives.”

The way Martinez handled Montoya’s situation was textbook-perfect, experts say. She expressed concern. She asked whether she could help. She told Montoya that the abuse wasn’t her fault, that the abuse was wrong and that there were resources to help her.

And she didn’t judge.

“Domestic violence is based so much in shaming and blaming victims, and it’s very hard (for victims) to reach out to ask for support.” Meyers said.

Offering support can give a person the validation she needs to recognize she’s in an unhealthy relationship.

But many times, co-workers, friends, neighbors or relatives hesitate to get involved because they worry that they’ll have to solve the problem.

Connie Phillips, executive director of Sojourner, a domestic-violence shelter, said they shouldn’t try.

“It’s not your job to solve it,” Phillips said. “There are people who care, and there are resources. That’s the kind of thing you can tell them.”

Help can be as simple as writing the toll-free number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) on a piece of paper or placing a brochure about domestic violence on a co-worker’s desk.

Ask questions such as, “What do you need?” or “What would be helpful?” Phillips suggested. “Sometimes, people say, ‘What I really need is a ride or help getting groceries.’”

It might be helpful for a victim to know that if her children came over at night, a neighbor would let them in.

But an abusive relationship can isolate a woman. The batterer may tell her the abuse is her fault.

“If no one is noticing and saying, ‘Something is wrong with this picture,’ the victim thinks, ‘Something must be wrong with me,’” Meyers said. “They think, ‘This must be normal, and I must just have to deal with it.’”

But if reaching out to victims of domestic violence is difficult, confronting the abuser can be even harder.

Perpetrators see themselves as the victim, said Carl Mangold, a therapist who runs groups for men who have been accused of domestic violence and ordered by the courts to get counseling.

They blame the woman. They say things like, “Do you see how she treats me?”

They also make the real victim believe that it’s her fault, Mangold said. But he said even abusers agree that it makes a difference when people get involved.

Paul Kivel, author of *Men’s Work: How to Stop the Violence That Tears Our Lives Apart*, agrees. “Abusers have said it would make a major difference to have men of authority, visibility and influence in their communities to have said this is wrong and you need to get help,” he said, adding that he’s seen a significant difference in churches where the minister has taken a stance against violence.

Mangold said that the *Men’s Anti-Violence Network*, a group of community leaders, is doing that in Arizona.

“Friends and family members do need to address the perpetrator,” he said. Rather than be confrontational, it’s best to say something like, “Are you aware of what you just said to your woman?”

Meyers said domestic violence breeds on silence: “The less silent we are, the more it’s going to come out and not be this dirty little secret.”

Montoya doesn’t know how long it would have taken her to leave her husband.

“All I had was that piece of paper,” she said. “I never felt criticized ...She (Martinez) truly cared for my well-being and my son’s well-being.”

Ten years later, Montoya is a teacher in the same Head Start school where she was once Martinez’s aide. The two women remain friends.

Montoya divorced her husband shortly after that Mother’s Day, when she called the police and moved into a shelter. She became a certified teacher. She has remarried and has two other children. Her son is thriving, she said.

What’s at stake if people don’t extend themselves?

For Montoya, it’s a question of potential. If you’re always told you can’t or you’re not good enough, you start believing it, she said.

DETAILS: dvwalk.azcentral.com.

Where to Turn for Help

- Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence: resource and referral information, (602) 279-2900.
- Child Protective Services: Child Abuse Hotline, 1-888-SOS-CHILD (1-888-767-2445).
- Child Crisis Center – East Valley Inc.: Hotline operates 24 hours for families in crisis, (480) 969-2308.
- Maricopa County shelters hotline: provides information on available space, 1-800-799-7739.
- Family Advocacy Center: Services include orders of protection, free counseling, support groups in Spanish and English, shelter and long-term housing assistance, and food baskets. 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, Suite 250, 2120 N. Central Ave., Phoenix. (602) 534-2120. After hours, call Crime Stop, (602) 262-6151, a non-emergency police number.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: refers callers to shelters in Arizona and the nation, 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233).

What to Say and What to Do If You Suspect Domestic Violence

Sometimes reaching out to someone you suspect of being a victim of domestic violence is as simple as leaving a phone number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-SAFE (799-7233). If the threat appears imminent, call 911. If your suspicions are less clear, here are some things you can say to the victim:

- “I’m worried about you. Is everything OK?”
- “I care about you. Here’s a phone number (1-800-799-SAFE) or a Web site ... “The site at www.ndvh.org provides state-by-state resources.
- “I’m concerned for your safety. This isn’t OK, and it’s not your fault. When you’re ready to leave, here’s a phone number of people who can help you.” (See the resource list.)
- Don’t have an agenda that includes having the person leave the abuser, and don’t say things such as, “I don’t see how you can stay with that guy.” Understand that leaving is a process. Whatever words you use, communicate that you care, that abuse – whether verbal, emotional or physical – is wrong, that the victim is not to blame and that there are resources that can help.
- Ask the victim what he or she needs. Ask what would be of help.

- Helping doesn't mean you have to fix the situation. Professional resources are available to help. It's enough to let the victim know she's not alone and that there are resources for various needs: shelter, legal advice, financial assistance, employment and educational services, and counseling for her and her children.

Sources: Connie Phillips, executive director of Sojourner domestic-violence shelter; Leah Meyer, director of services for the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Reach the reporter at (602)444-8246

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