

The Light & Champion (Center, TX)

March 26, 2007

Domestic Violence – Part 2

(Editor's Note: This is the second of a six-part series on the epidemic of domestic violence in East Texas and across the United States. Today's segment deals with the signs of a woman caught in a domestic violence situation. Gail Davenport is an area woman, but we've given her a fictitious name.)

By John Krueger, Editor

Gail Davenport was just like any other professional woman – on the outside. She woke up in the morning and went to work. She dressed like a professional businesswoman, acted like a professional and led what most felt was a normal life.

But what the world never saw in her – or in almost all other women who are victims of domestic violence – was the constant feelings of insecurity, anxiety, intimidation and terror that were on the inside. They were part of a lifestyle that had become the normal of her life because of what her abuser was doing to her day in and day out.

What is domestic violence and just how big of an epidemic is it? By definition, domestic violence is coercive behavior through the use of intimidation, threatening, harmful, or harassing behavior, according to the National Victim Assistance Academy. This definition validates that domestic violence includes multiple forms of abuse – physical, sexual, emotional and psychological. In a lot of cases, domestic violence will add another form of abuse to its already unlive-able realm – stalking. Once the victim tries to free herself from abuser and is no longer in contact with him, his next tool of power and control is stalking.

More than seven million women and two million men in the United States have been stalked, finds a study from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Stalking affects seven percent of women (1-in-14) and two percent of men (1-in-50) in the U.S. at some time in their lives, according to the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

A 2002 study found that the physical and mental health effects of being stalked were not gender-related. Both male and female victims experienced impaired health, depression, injury and were more likely to engage in substance abuse than their non-stalked peers.

And this is just one way that an abuser gains control of his or her partner. The person does it slowly, methodically over time so the victim comes to learn that this is how life is supposed to be and then she (in most cases) is embarrassed or frightened to do anything about it.

“He would come by my work every day on his motorcycle and ‘rev’ the motor at a stop light outside, so I would know it was him,” Davenport said as she remembered those days right before and after her strangulation on June 30, 2005. “And because he told me he would cut me up in little pieces if I told anyone, I was afraid for my life.

“The sound of that engine or the sound of his pickup truck was etched in my mind. It was like out of the thousands of vehicles, I knew the sound of his. Every time I heard it – whether day or night – I would immediately begin to shake.

“I can’t begin to describe the terror I felt.” And it is the same terror that is felt on the inside of all victims of domestic violence.

According to a study of U.S. Department of Justice Third Report to Congress under the Violence Against Women Act, intimate partners that stalk are four times more likely than intimate partners in the general population to physically assault their victims and six times more likely to sexually assault their victims.

A recent survey of college women indicates that the incidence rate of stalking on campuses is far higher than previous surveys indicate. Stalking behavior occurred at rates as high as 156.5 per 1000 female students, or 13.1% of the female students on college campuses, according to the National Institute of Justice in 2000.

Just like the night when she was reportedly strangled by her estranged boyfriend, Davenport felt her life was on the line. After being allegedly strangled on June 30, 2005 and after getting away from her assailant, Davenport fled to her daughter’s home. As she drove there the shock of what had happened wore off and terror set in.

She was having trouble catching her breath (another sign of strangulation, she would later learn). Her daughter was having trouble understanding her as she told her daughter what had happened over the cell phone.

“I will never forget showing up on my daughter’s doorstep in the shape no mother would ever want her daughter to see her in,” Davenport said of her shaken condition with clothes still soiled. “Through no fault of her own, my daughter was thrust into the role she was unprepared to play. She became the mother and I became the daughter.”

And even though she has escaped her aggressor, Davenport wouldn’t let her daughter call police. Her daughter also knew what the man was capable of by past experiences she had witnessed.

“I begged her to not (call the police),” Davenport remembers. “I was so scared he would hunt me down and cut me into the ‘million pieces’ he had told me he was going to earlier that night.”

In addition to the terror, being ashamed of what she had become – what he had driven her to – made her feel so alone in the world; as if no one could help.

“I was so ashamed that I had lived in something like this,” she explained about her relationship. “This didn’t happen to people like me; not people who had a job like I did, and a house like I did.”

This wasn’t a situation that would ‘go away’. Because of the shame, Davenport – and many women that experience the same situation – try to make it go away and act as if nothing has happened. And the ‘outside world’ may think things are normal, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“I kept thinking I had to put on a big ‘front’ for people,” Davenport stated. “Even after my friends and family found out, they felt I needed to ‘put it behind me and move on with my life’.” But like many who have gone through a traumatic experience as she did, life would never be the same.

Davenport’s outlook on life had changed. She soon found out she was suffering from depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2000) defines as occurring when a person has been exposed to an extreme traumatic stressor in which both of the following were present:

- The person directly experienced an event or event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity.
- The person’s response to the event or events must involve intense fear, helplessness or horror.

As stated earlier, the abuser in domestic violence cases is calculated and over time molds and shapes his victim the way he pleases, according to a study by the National Center for Victim’s of Crime (NCVC). He often restricts a victim’s outlets, forbidding the victim to maintain outside employment, friends and family ties. This has an isolating effect, leaving victims with no support system and creating dependency. Abusers also limit a survivor’s options by not allowing access to checking accounts, credit cards or other sources of money or financial independence. The abuser may track phone usage, where and how much money is spent, and make the survivor feel guilty if she associates with family or friends that do not like him.

“He used to accuse me of picking my friends over him and tell me that they were against him,” Davenport explained. “He isolated me from my family over time by accusing me of being ‘unfaithful’ in my love for him while I was gone.

“It got to the point it just caused too much ‘hell’ when I got home, so I quit going to see them on a regular basis,” she explained with shame in her voice.

“He would take my cell phone when I walked in the door after work. He made me feel guilty for having contact with the ‘outside world’. I see now it was his way of isolating me and

keeping control over me.”

According to the NCVS, domestic violence victims will often blame their own behavior, rather than the violent actions of the abuser. Victims may try continually to alter their behavior and circumstances in order to please the abuser – believing that if they follow certain rules and make sure the abuser is happy they will not be hurt. However, violence perpetrated by abusers is often self-driven and depends little on the victims’ actions or words.

Domestic violence often becomes volatile and it’s often too late for the victim by the time law enforcement does something about it. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for the calendar year 2003, homicides were the second-leading cause of death on the job for women, and 15% of the 119 workplace homicides of women in that year were attributed to a current or former husband or boyfriend.

Fifty-nine percent of the murder victims known to have been killed by an intimate in 1999 were shot to death. Between 1993 and 1999, an intimate was responsible for 45% of homicides of women between the ages of 20-24 and almost 40% of the homicides of women between 35-49.

Thirty percent of the women murdered in the United States in 1999 were murdered by a husband, former husband or boyfriend. In Texas, 143 women were killed by their intimate partner in 2005.

Is domestic violence a problem in our country? Seventy-three percent of all Texans believe that it is a serious problem in the Lone Star state, according to a study done by the Texas Council on Family Violence. Statistics show that there were 187,811 family violence incidents in Texas in 2005.

Help for victims can come from those closest to them and for friends and family to attempt to have a compassionate understanding for what victims are going through. If victims assume that no one understands, they are less likely to seek help from law enforcement. If the people that are closest to them don’t understand, why would they think that law enforcement would understand?

It’s important that those victims be assisted and supported and helped whenever possible so they do not believe they are fighting insurmountable odds.

Support is the key, studies show, so the victim won’t feel they are alone. If a victim has support, they may be willing to get help.

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