

# *The Light & Champion* (Center, TX)

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## **Domestic Violence – Part 5**

(Editor’s Note: This is the fifth in a series of six articles on the ‘epidemic’ of domestic violence that plagues the United States and East Texas. This is a personal account of an area woman – we call her Gail Davenport, to protect her identity – and her battle against the obstacles she faces daily. Today’s story deals with help and support for victims of domestic violence.)

By John Krueger, Editor

Many people who aren’t associated with domestic violence cases or haven’t been a victim of the crime don’t understand why those who are victims stay in the situation or often return to the relationship with the person who assaulted them – whether the abuse be psychological or physical or both.

The key to helping someone escape this kind of ‘prison’ many times may come from those that know the victim the best – friends and family.

Gail Davenport, like many others like her, was caught in the ‘world’ that her partner created around her. It was one facet of the alleged manipulation, plan and execution of that plan that made her think that a controlled relationship – and eventually abusive – relationship was what the ‘norm’ was all about.

Cindy Hutchins, Director of the Shelby County Advocacy Center, says that many times the women and children of abusers get caught in the web of their aggressor, the man who says he loves them very much. But, in the end, what he does is harm them and damage them for a lifetime.

“The person in this relationship who is the abuser is very manipulative,” Hutchins said. “They’re thinking about things that you and I wouldn’t. They have a very controlling and very cunning-type behavior. They’ll turn the situation around to make you think you’re the crazy one.”

Davenport said that was the way it was with her. She said her assailant even went as far as to bug his own home when she lived with him, something he later admitted to doing while testifying in her protective order hearing.

“My friend and I found a ‘bug’ in the bedroom that I always slept in at her house,” Davenport stated. “It looked like a tiny microphone about the size of a pencil eraser and was sticking out of the ceiling.

“A wire ran from it up through the attic. When we traced the wire it went out the eave of the house, down the outside wall, and it was cut down by the ground. I would have thought I was crazy if she hadn’t seen it. I asked her to please go give a sworn statement to the police about it and some other things she had witnessed so that they wouldn’t think I was crazy.

She did that for me. If not for my friends witnessing some of the chaos, I would have probably committed myself somewhere thinking I was as crazy as he proclaimed I was.”

Hutchins said that ‘spy’ techniques are just one of the ways that domestic violence aggressors control their ‘prey’.

“It’s the mind games and the control that the victims go through that is just part of the trap,” Hutchins said of this kind of situation. “We’ve seen cameras set up in people’s houses. We’ve talked to children who talk about cameras being set up in their rooms (in cases of child abuse). And when we’ve gone out there the cameras are gone. But who’s to say they weren’t there. Someone might have gotten wind that the law was coming and took them out.” Davenport says unless you are in a domestic violence situation and get out, nobody can understand the magnitude of the manipulation and the psychological abuse. She said this is what affects victims such as her for so much longer than the physical abuse.

“There is both physical and mental abuse, but the lasting effects can be just as long from both,” Davenport stated. “There is PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and, in my case, brain damage resulting from the strangulation.

“I’m in constant fear of my life. It’s not something you can just switch off or get over. That’s why it’s so important to put those responsible for domestic violence behind bars.”

## **THE FIRST STEP**

What is the first step?

The first step to helping victims of domestic violence involves those around the situation, Hutchins said. It is important that close friends and relatives believe and support the victims every way possible so the victim will get away from the situation and not feel trapped.

“I think communities don’t understand just how big this problem is,” Hutchins said. “It’s almost as if it has to have an affect on them directly for them to fully understand it. It has to be their sister or mother or daughter for them to become compassionate about it and for it to ‘hit’ home.

“It’s everywhere. We’ve had people say it’s worse here in Shelby County. I don’t think that it’s worse; we’re just trying to do something about it. We’re trying to get the people responsible charged.

“Women are being killed. And it’s not just one class of people; it crosses all socio-economic barriers. It’s not just poor people that do this. There are no ethnic barriers either. Abuse and

drug use is in every social class.

“(The victims) need family and community support. I believe in counseling, and I’ve seen what good that this has done for victims. But if you’re out there and you’re all alone, you’re made to think you’re the ‘bad guy’ because you’ve turned in ‘my son’ and you feel totally isolated.

“It’s hard to make it, not just financially, but psychologically. That’s why the people around that person need to stand with her and say, ‘son you should not have done that to her; let’s get you some help’. That would be better.”

Davenport said the feeling of being isolated and alone makes it difficult.

“First of all I was ashamed to be in that situation,” she admitted. “And the last thing you want to do is to tell someone because you’re embarrassed. Then because you’re ‘beaten down’ so much psychologically, you don’t think you deserve any better; and you worry that no one will believe you. The abuser told me no one would believe me, and you know what, he was pretty much right.”

“Victims need that help and support so much. They need it while they’re trying to get away and they need it while they’re trying to put the person who did this to them away so they won’t do it to them or the next woman.”

## **THE SIGNS**

What are the signs that someone is in a domestic violence relationship? According to the book, “Family & Friends’ Guide to Domestic Violence”, by Elaine Weiss, Ed.D., they include the following:

- Her social relationships have narrowed – She has pulled away from people she used to see frequently. She cancels social plans at the last minute. If she is on the phone when he arrives home, she ends the call quickly. At social gatherings, she is quieter than she used to be, sticking close to him or studying his facial expressions.
- He makes all the rules – He has convinced her to drop out of college so that she can help him build a new business. He decides where they live, how their children are disciplined, and even what outfits she can wear.
- He puts her down – He teases her, makes her the butt of jokes, or subjects her to outright ridicule. He calls her by a vaguely insulting nickname. He criticizes her appearance. He undermines her authority with her children. He makes fun of her opinions, her family, her religion, or her ethnicity.
- She is afraid – She tells you that there are problems at home but that they are her fault. You have seen him glare at her...and seen her flinch. You have overheard vicious arguments. You know that there are weapons in the house.
- She has been injured – Your normally graceful relative or friend has suddenly become ‘accident-prone’. She has bruises or injuries that do not match her explanations. She has taken to wearing shirts with long sleeves and high collars.

Those are just some of the signs that family and friends should look for if a friend or relative ‘doesn’t seem right’ in a relationship. Davenport said she fell prey to many of them in hers.

## **GOING TO POLICE**

Many times going to the law enforcement authorities can be a big step – and almost as scary – for victims, Hutchins stated. Because of the investigative nature of police, victims can often think that they are being put under the same scrutiny as the aggressor in the relationship. “Police are going to look at everybody and everything in an investigation and that can be very difficult for a victim who has already had their character ‘beaten down’ so many times before,” Hutchins said. “Just to go to law enforcement is difficult. As nice as they may be, it’s tough to walk into a sheriff’s department or that police station and tell your story.

“And the authorities have to look at everything because they want to make sure that person coming in is not lying and not just trying to get another person into trouble.”

For law enforcement, their job is often difficult. Statistics say that it takes an average of seven times for a victim to leave her abusive significant other before she leaves him for good. “It is disheartening because I’ve helped women get out of situations before,” Hutchins admitted. “They’ve (victim) gone out the back door and law enforcement have gone back and got their things. And almost before we could get them settled, they were back home.

“You almost want to throw your hands up and give up, but you can’t; you have to keep going because the next time you might be saving a life.”

Davenport says she can see where the people who help those in domestic violence situations would just want to throw in the towel. She states, “When I was going through the system, I found out how hard it can be to just get a protective order at times, much less charges filed. I found out they were not going to press charges even though I wanted to. I went ahead with my protective order for several reasons. I knew it was just a piece of paper that he can walk through anytime, but by this time, I felt the county attorney was finally believing me a little bit. I knew testifying would be hell with the abuser sitting there, staring me down, but I wanted to follow through what I had started.

“I wanted the powers that be to see that I believed in a system that I thought had failed me. I didn’t want the work that they did in the end to be for nothing. I want women to know that as hard as it was, after it was over, for the first time in years I felt that I was taking control of my life again. When I got off that stand, I had a little bit of my dignity back. Just having that little bit of control was so empowering, but unless you’ve been there, done that, you will never understand it.”

Hutchins said women also need to think about their children’s safety when leaving their husband, even though the wife is the victim of domestic violence.

“An incentive for the women to leave and stay is the safety of the children,” she explained. “If the children are being abused and the wife doesn’t do anything, she can get into trouble

legally for not protecting them.”

## **HELP IS THERE**

For victims of domestic violence, help is out there. An extension of family and friends are places such as The Advocacy Center located at 220 Field Street in Center (Phone: 936-590-9864) and the Women’s Shelter of East Texas in Nacogdoches, which helps women in Shelby County as well. The crisis hotline is 936-569-8850. The main number is 936-569-1018. Police and other law enforcement must inform victims of their legal rights against their assailant when it comes to protection. There are national toll-free numbers where victims can call. Some of them include:

- Family Violence Prevention Fund/Health Resource Center: 1-800-438-6233.
- National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC): 1-800-394-2255.
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information: 1-800-729-6686.
- National Clearinghouse on child Abuse and Neglect Information: 1-800-394-3366.
- National Criminal Justice Reference Service: 1-800-851-3420.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233.
- National Resource Center for Domestic Violence: 1-800-537-2238.
- National White Collar Crime Center: 1-888-693-2874.
- Office for Victims of Crime Resource Center: 1-800-851-3420.
- Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network: 1-800-656-4673.

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