

The Light & Champion (Center, TX)

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Domestic Violence – Part 6

(Editor's Note: This is the final part of 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 Gail Davenport, to protect her identity – and her battle against the obstacles she faces daily. Today's story deals with the life of victims after their direct battle with domestic violence and how they try to cope with it.)

By John Krueger, Editor

Statistics and personal accounts show that the battle for victims of domestic violence doesn't end when their assailant is arrested or they receive their protective order. Many times there is no such thing as complete 'healing' from the ordeal. And, unfortunately, many times the situation ends in the death of the victim.

For Gail Davenport, her battle continued long after the violence ended. In the next six months there was stalking and another battle – with law enforcement – to find justice because of what was allegedly done to her.

Then there was a battle with the Crime Victim Compensation Division of Texas. This office collects money from convicted defendants as part of their fine to offer monetary compensation for medical bills and lost wages to victims of violent crimes. Davenport was unable to work after suffering from brain damage and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder caused from the alleged assault.

This agency, which exists to protect and assist victims such as Davenport, at first couldn't provide assistance because the Nacogdoches County Attorney allegedly didn't give them the information needed to proceed. Then there were the countless hours that she worked to make sure paper trails from doctors to CVC didn't break down.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR VICTIMS

So what do victims of domestic violence face and think about once the 'dust has settled' and they are 'expected' to move on with their lives?

"The comment, 'Let it go; it's in your past', insinuates that one should not be feeling any pain from their past," Davenport said this week. "It's as though because they have left their abuser, they are all better now."

“That’s simply not the case.

“Once a person leaves his or her abuser, they are now in a safe environment, for the first time in a very long time. The abuser may very well be in their past; however, telling a survivor that they must forget about it is like telling them it didn’t exist.”

Davenport said because of physical and mental damage done, victims may take a very long time – or may never – overcome the affects of the physical and psychological abuse. She says it is often the mental aspect of the injuries that will stay with the victim forever.

“Sometimes others get impatient with us for not ‘getting past it’ sooner,” she explained. “Remember, we are feeling overwhelmed; we can’t comprehend how someone says they love you and in the next breath intentionally hurts you. What we need is your patience and support.”

“Right now it is very important for us to allow our minds to deal with the past. We are trying to reorganize our whole outlook on the world. We are trying to rationalize an irrational part of our lives; this won’t happen overnight.

“Support is a key, and it can come from a variety of areas. Your support is extremely important to us.

“Remember, we have been ‘trained’ to hold things in. We have been trained NOT to tell others about the abuse. We did not tell sooner for a variety of reasons; we were fearful about how you would react, what might happen, etc.

“We have been threatened verbally and/or physically beaten to keep us quiet, and we live with that fear. Remember we know what he is capable of; we’ve lived it.”

Davenport explained that just because the victim is away from her abuser doesn’t mean she no longer has anything to worry about.

She compares it to someone who has come back from a war and is suffering from the after-affects of that experience; the nightmares; the visions; the hyper-ventilation; the startle response; that psychological battle goes on within the person for days, weeks, months and, many times, years to come. It can wear a body out.

The battle never truly stops.

“You don’t consciously try to remember, but the body remembers.” states Davenport. “Your body can hear or see something that it ties – say a particular violent episode – and it takes off on auto-pilot. All it has to go by is past experience, and past experience has taught it those sights or sounds mean pain and possible death.

“How many times do you have to touch a hot stove before your body does not allow you to touch it anymore? It just becomes automatic.”

VICTIMS MUST BE RE-ASSURED

Davenport said it's important for the victim to be supported and re-assured that they did the best they could under the circumstances during their time of terror.

"First and foremost the victim must be continuously re-assured that it wasn't their fault," she stated. "Society always shifts the blame to the victim. It says, 'Why doesn't SHE just leave?' Instead, people should say, 'What's wrong with HIM?' That would reiterate the fact that it's not her fault, it's his."

Davenport says that she knows many people would say, "I would never stand for that," implying that the woman was weak. Instead, she says, they should say, "I don't see how you did it, you are strong. I admire you for taking a stand and finally getting out of there. You are a survivor."

"People forget that in most cases, the woman really loves her abuser – at least, the only definition of love she knows," Davenport explained. "And if she loves him then it is hard to get him 'in trouble'."

"I try to explain it like this: You love your children; you don't always approve of what they do. And when they do something wrong or make bad choices that might get them in trouble with the police, most parents tell the police, 'He/she is not a bad kid; couldn't you just scare him/her a little. I don't want them to go to jail or anything, just make them think that they might. Just scare them straight.'"

"It is hard to send someone you love, or loved at one time, to jail. How many parents would actually press charges against their children?"

"You have this turmoil going on inside you because you are scared to death of them, yet you love or loved them."

MORE STATISTICS

Domestic violence is real; it does not just occur in one or two social classes; it knows no monetary value; and it doesn't matter whether people live in small or large communities; urban or rural areas. Domestic violence is real and the public, whether the people in communities are directly affected by it, needs to become more aware and the people must do their part in helping to slow it down.

The National Census of Domestic Violence Services released statistics this week that are staggering. On November 2, 2006, 71 out of 123 identified local domestic violence programs – 58 percent – in Texas participated in a NCDVS 24-hour survey.

This was designed to address the safety and confidentiality needs of victims. The census collected an unduplicated, non-invasive count of adults and children who received critical

services from local domestic violence during a 24-hour survey period.

In Texas alone, 2,203 victims of domestic violence received housing services from a domestic violence program (of the 58% participating). In all, 4,483 adults and children were served in Texas in a 24-hour period.

The report showed that 1,438 adults and victims found refuge in emergency violence shelters, 765 were living in transitional housing programs designed specifically for DV survivors, and 2,280 sought non-residential advocacy and services, such as individual counseling, legal advocacy and children's support groups.

Even so, programs reported a considerable unmet demand for services due to the lack of resources, including limited staffing and overflowing shelters in the state.

The survey showed 652 Texans who requested services were tragically unmet due to the lack of resources; there were 203 unmet requests for emergency shelter; 144 unmet requests for transitional housing; and 305 that had unmet requests for non-residential services.

In the 24-hour period, 1,266 hotline calls were answered by local programs, more than 53 per hour. An additional 1,213 hotline calls were answered by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, based in Austin.

These figures included ONLY 58% of the centers across the state.

The study also showed that many venues in the state are understaffed. Fifteen percent employ less than 10 people on staff, 18% employ 10-20 paid staff and 13% employ 21-40 paid staff. This includes the large cities such as Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and Austin.

TIME TO MAKE A CHANGE

Gail Davenport said she wants to make a difference; so others won't have to suffer as she has – or even meet a worse ending such as death.

She says she hopes that even though she will continue to battle and live with the effects of her alleged attack, others that are in DV situations need to get out as soon as possible.

Batterers have a problem and need professional help. A victim will not be able to solve it or 'love' them enough to cure it.

And those that believe they know someone in a domestic violence situation need to take a stand, get involved, and make a difference as well.
It could mean saving a life.

Davenport states, "If there is one thing that I could leave in peoples minds who might know someone or come across someone in this situation, it is this: Tell the victim, 'It's not your fault.' It has taken me over a year to be able to say that and mean it. He had convinced me over a four-year period that it was always my fault. Well you know what....It's Not My Fault."

(The Light and Champion thanks this woman for coming forward and sharing her story with us. We thank her for making a difference and showing such courage.)

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