

# ***The Morning News*** (Northwest Arkansas)

Saturday, February 23, 2008 6:46 PM CST in News

## **Domestic Violence Can Effect Workplace Performance – Employers Begin to Address Abuse at Work**

By Bob Caudle (bcaudle@nwaonline.net), The Morning News

SPRINGDALE, AR – Ruth and Ricky Dale Roberts worked together at McKee Foods in Gentry in the early 1990s.

They separated in January 1991, the same month McKee Foods fired Ricky. Unhappy about losing his job, Ricky took his frustrations out on Ruth. The beating inflicted by Ricky sent Ruth to the hospital, but the violence didn't end there.

Seven months later, on July 25, Ruth was dead, face down in her Springtown driveway. Ricky shot her five times in the back of the head with .22-caliber rifle.

Ricky Dale Roberts was sentenced to serve life in prison for first-degree murder. He remains a prisoner in the Delta Regional Unit.

The incident inspired McKee Foods, makers of Little Debbie snack cakes, to start Project Ruth - a program to identify and help victims of domestic abuse. The company started the program in October 1997.

“We had a lot of learning to do. There was a seminar put on by the women's shelter and the Benton County Sheriff's Office. We attended that and came back with information,” said Melissa Smith, director of human resources for McKee Foods.

McKee Foods has about 1,550 employees, and the company is involved with 12 to 15 abuse victims per year on average, male and female, Smith said

“The program is pretty basic,” she said. “It's about raising awareness and training supervisors to recognize and respond to abusive situations. We keep in touch with resources for the victim and customize their needs. It may be as simple as parking closer to the building or letting them have some extra time off. It's simple, but very effective.”

Domestic violence, whether it's carried directly into the workplace or not, is costly.

According to the American Institute on Domestic Violence, lost productivity and earnings due to intimate partner violence accounts for almost \$1.8 billion a year.

Intimate partner violence victims lose nearly 8 million days of paid work each year - the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs and nearly 5.6 million days of household productivity.

A study titled “Coming Into The Light: Intimate Partner Violence and its Effects At Work,” co-authored by Anney O’Leery Kelly, Emily Lean and Carol Reeves, all with the University of Arkansas Department of Management in the Sam M. Walton College of Business, addresses how violence at home affects work patterns.

Many employees in abusive situations make it to work because they need the income if they’re going to leave the abuser. However, the study says, instances of tardiness arise more often in workers involved in a domestic violence situation. Also, the study found, employees and their abusers cannot check their emotions at the door.

“One of the security guards at Liz Claiborne told us that’s one of his greatest fears,” Reeves said. “Domestic violence is so messy and so fraught with passion. People do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do.”

Liz Claiborne, established in 1976 as a women’s’ clothing design business, began a program in the early 1990s to deal with domestic violence spilling over into the workplace.

Part of Claiborne’s experience is reflected in the UA professors’ study.

“The longer ago the abuse occurred, say more than a year ago, they’re not as distracted at work, but they’re absent more,” Reeves said. “Current victims are there more, but more distracted. That is consistent with the assumption that the person undergoing current abuse is trying to get out of it.”

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