

# Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

November 28, 2004

## Distressing Tale of Abuse; Broward Agency Helps Plantation Woman Get Her Life Back on Track after Tragedy

By Karla D. Shores, Education Writer

She was an executive assistant at Motorola in Sunrise, where her husband of nearly 14 years worked as an engineer.

He was in a men's service group and she worked in the nursery at a church in Plantation. They lived comfortably with their two young children in a four-bedroom house in Plantation.

But Nancy Horneman, 46, who suffered through a turbulent marriage and lost her two children to domestic violence, tells her story as if her life began more than five years ago, on Jan. 1, 1999, when, after she suffered a particularly brutal beating, police showed up at her house.

Her bruises were still fresh. Her lip was split and her body ached from being thrown through two rooms.

The officer handed Horneman a business card and told her, "You don't deserve this. It will only get worse. There are people who will help you," she recalled.

The card listed contact numbers for a place Horneman knew nothing about – Women In Distress. But the organization became her lifeline.

"There were so many nights when I would call the hotline because I was so scared," said Horneman, now living with Mr. Puff, her daughter's cat, in a secluded condo in Plantation. "Women In Distress provides hope. They attacked the whole problem, not just a piece of it. They are out there trying to help, to educate."

Women In Distress hopes to increase education programs in public and private schools because teenagers are the fastest-growing segment of domestic violence victims, said Andrea Bradley, the nonprofit's president and chief executive officer.

The Palm Beach County affiliate, Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse, provides similar services to Palm Beach County residents.

The agencies take a holistic approach, including classes and treatment for the batterer as well as the victim.

Nancy Horneman wishes her husband had taken those classes.

Walter Horneman occasionally hit Nancy when they dated, but she was in love so she didn't worry about it, she said.

They got married and had Stephanie, their "miracle child" because Horneman didn't think she could get pregnant. Little Gus came two years later.

Walter Horneman, a recovering alcoholic, stopped drinking during most of their marriage, but he became increasingly abusive after Gus was born.

Horneman felt she did everything wrong in her husband's eyes. She said he would hit her for leaving a clean spoon on the counter, or for forgetting to line up canned foods in alphabetical order in the cupboard. He monitored her phone calls, even to her mother, and threatened her if he had any inkling she wanted to call for help.

When her husband fell back into drinking binges, she learned to ride the waves in her tumultuous household and carve out happy spots.

"When Walter was out of the house, the house came alive," she said.

Horneman finally couldn't take it any more. On New Year's Eve 1998, Walter drunkenly stumbled into the garage to smoke a cigarette. Gus, 2, was asleep in his crib. Stephanie, 4, was at a relative's house.

"I told him he had to leave and he just looked at me and didn't say anything," she said.

When she took a step to walk away, her 6-foot-2, 200-pound husband grabbed both her arms, yanked her back, then grabbed her neck with both hands and slammed her into a wall two rooms away, she said. He beat her for several minutes and knocked the phone from her hands as she tried to call 911, she said.

For the next eight months, Horneman struggled through a separation and divorce. Her husband constantly tried to move back into the house. But through education and training by Women In Distress, she was able to say no.

Horneman filed for a restraining order against her husband, although she said he was able to stalk her at night without breaking the order because he had the right to use a car they shared. He also had full rights to see his children because a judge ruled he had not harmed them, Horneman said.

It was Walter's turn to keep the children on a Friday in August 1999. When she called him to discuss picking up the children on Sunday, she realized he was drunk and decided to send the police to his apartment instead.

When police arrived they found Stephanie and Gus dead, tucked neatly in their beds. Walter had asphyxiated the children, according to toxicology reports. He had then hanged himself with fishing wire.

For months that turned into years, Horneman said she struggled to understand her husband's actions, why he felt he had to kill. She found out only at his funeral that he was a victim of abuse as a child.

"The reason why he took their lives is because in domestic violence, the children become nonhuman," Horneman said. "They were his tools to get to me."

She started collecting angel figurines, pictures of angels, anything with angels, to help soothe her pain. Being alone was her biggest struggle. Horneman found that when she was alone, the horror sank back in over and over.

So she became more active and accepted the helping hands offered to her. Horneman said Women In Distress and a counselor with her employee assistance program at work empowered her to mourn her children and get to know herself.

Now Horneman, a teacher, speaker, successful businesswoman and independent associate for Pre-paid Legal Services, shares her story with abuse victims nationally. She points out they are "women, men, gay and straight."

She hopes to start a foundation in her children's names for domestic violence victims who are forced to start over on their own, without financial help.

"You can either let fear stop you in your tracks or use it as fuel. I chose to use it as fuel," said Horneman. "I realize I must have been left behind for a reason. If I can save one life by telling one story, the kids didn't die in vain."

*Karla Shores can be reached at [kshores@sun-sentinel.com](mailto:kshores@sun-sentinel.com) or 954-356-4552.*

## ABOUT THE AGENCY

For every family or person featured in Sun-Sentinel/WB39 Children's Fund stories, there are many in need. The agency spotlighted today, Women In Distress, wants to help more of them. Serving South Florida for 30 years, Women In Distress began as a four-bedroom home on Sistrunk Boulevard and gradually grew into a thriving agency that offers 62 beds in confidential locations throughout Broward County. The agency offers counseling, legal aid and job training, as well as a volunteer program and a thrift store. A Palm Beach County affiliate, Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse, provides similar services to Palm Beach County residents. The hotline

number for Women In Distress is 954-761-1133. For general information call 954-760-9800 or visit their Web site at [www.womenindistress.org](http://www.womenindistress.org). The hotline number for Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse is 561-265-2900 or 1-800-355-8547. For general information call 561-265-3797.

Contributions to the Sun-Sentinel/WB39 Children's Fund will make it possible for local nonprofit agencies to serve needy children and families by providing grants for food, shelter, health care, abuse prevention services, educational and cultural programs -- even toys for the holidays. All administrative costs are paid by the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, WB39 and the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which contributes \$1 for every \$2 donated. To contribute, please call 800-381-2112 or visit [www.sun-sentinel.com/childrensfund](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/childrensfund).

Copyright © 2004 Sun-Sentinel Company.