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Domestic Abuse Recognizes No Social Barriers

By Donna Britt

A twentysomething man wearing neat dreadlocks, work boots and a huge parka is standing at the front desk of the Domestic Violence Intake Center at the D.C. Superior Court. His words to the receptionist dispel any impression of hip-hop bravado that his appearance suggests: "I had to put my car in the garage so [my girlfriend] wouldn't do anything to it."

In a waiting room, two silent, elementary school-age boys watch a children's video with an equally rapt little girl whose head is a field of pigtails. A gray-haired woman with a cane explains that she's a recovering drug addict seeking a restraining order against a former associate who "won't leave me alone – especially when he knows my check is coming."

Two women sit together, huddled over a clipboard. One gently rubs the shoulder of the other, who's filling out a form requesting protection from her husband. The thirtyish complainant's lush black coat, Burberry plaid scarf and sleek ponytail all whisper "professional."

Her mouth is whispering something else:

"Why do I always end up with the crazy ones?" Nobody expects to find him- or herself here, in this office in which the gray cubicles and hushed, safe air seem worlds away from the threats, curses, shoves and worse that brought them here.

Lydia Watts understands the contrast. She is director of Women Empowered Against Violence (WEAVE), which offers psychological and financial counseling, legal services and help in obtaining restraining orders – and has offices at the courthouse and at Greater Southeast Community Hospital. She says the disconnect that abuse victims feel from their circumstances resembles the one that separates them from people who never have experienced such mistreatment.

It's the "It only happens to *them*" syndrome, which tells people that domestic abuse "only happens to poor people, to women who are uneducated or have no family support," she says. "But abuse knows no barriers."

Then there's the "If it were *me*" theory, in which never-abused people insist, "If a man hit *me*, I would . . ." and complete the sentence with "leave his behind," "kick his behind" or "sic the police on his behind."

Some women surely would react to abuse with such authority. But others might surprise themselves, Watts suggests. “I tell people: ‘Take out your wallet. How long could you last with only what’s in it – your license, a couple of credit cards. What if you have a family? When do you return to your job? He knows where you work. What if he’s threatening to kidnap your kids?’

“It’s more difficult than ‘just leave.’”

Watts learned that in high school when a close friend confessed that her father abused her for years. Suddenly, Watts understood that though everyone had sensed that something “strange” was going on with her friend, they had “accommodated it, even though she was coming to school with black eyes.”

Watts had found her life’s calling. No one should be like her friend, “living through all of that alone.”

Everyone remembers Scott Peterson’s hugely publicized conviction in November of killing his wife, Laci, and his unborn son. But who remembers the dozens of local women who were threatened, beaten and a few even killed within weeks of that conviction, with little resulting public outrage?

Doreen M. McClendon was killed in Greenbelt; her live-in boyfriend – against whom she tried and failed to get a protection order – was arrested. Pregnant Shawndre Fulton was killed in Fairfax County; her boyfriend was indicted in her killing and that of her unborn baby. Sarah Crawford of Prince William County was killed shortly after seeking a protection order against her estranged husband, whom police arrested in the slaying.

Most domestic abuse victims aren’t slain. But even if people are “only” threatened, they still feel frightened and demeaned.

How, I asked Watts, does a smart woman – or a man; 10 percent of WEAVE’s clients are male – end up abused?

Some, she says, have dated an abusive mate for just a few months – but feel emotionally dependent upon him or her. “There’s HIV out there – the dating world is scary,” Watts says. Others tell themselves, “I *did* nag him about things; maybe if I change, the abuse will stop.” Others convince themselves that their abusers love them so much that they can’t control themselves.

I know a thirtysomething woman who met a handsome man who for weeks took her to movies, read religious books with her and discussed marriage. “I was sort of swept off my feet,” she admits – until she saw his fiery temper, which during one argument caused him to throw a food container at her. At first, she tried ignoring it.

When she finally said, “No more,” he refused to accept the breakup. He wouldn’t stop calling her.

She knows she should have ended things earlier. “But I didn’t want to give up the cuddling, the closeness,” she says. Waiting, she realizes, was “a huge mistake.”

Not all victims blame themselves. The woman with the clipboard, whom I phoned the day after seeing her at the center, reported that she did ask her husband – whose fierce verbal attacks before their children were growing increasingly profane – to leave. Although stunned, he did so quietly.

“I didn’t want my son thinking that’s how you treat someone, or my daughter to think that’s what a relationship is,” the woman explains. “Maybe if he goes through intensive counseling, he’ll realize what he did was wrong. If not, I’m out of the situation.

“I need to work on me.”

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