

When Love Turns Violent

Facing the Facts About Domestic Violence

by April D. Boland
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

It could be your closest friend. It could be your sister or brother. It could be your coworker, your neighbor, your parent or your child. Chances are that someone you know has experienced or even now is experiencing domestic violence.

Laura Pressley did. Today she's a successful career woman who holds a PhD in physical chemistry and is a senior member of the technical staff at Freescale Semiconductor Inc. in Austin. She holds several patents and is a published expert on process engineering and enhancing the yield of semiconductor devices. Yet Pressley, now forty-five years of age, has a past that most people would find hard to forget. When she was far younger and living in Houston, she found herself in a violent marriage.



Being Abused? Here's What to Do

The violence in Pressley's life began where it does in the lives of so many: in the home where she grew up. Her father, a six-foot-tall farmer, rancher and cattle auctioneer in Fort Worth, was violent and abused her mother throughout Pressley's childhood. She recalls one particularly traumatic incident in which her father had beaten her mother so badly that there were bruises all over her face and arms. The family attended a party the next day, but no one even mentioned the telltale signs of abuse. "So many friends were there," Pressley recalls, "and no one said a word. I couldn't believe it. I was like, 'What is going on? Why aren't you helping her?' That was my first experience with the silence of it."

The ongoing abuse in Pressley's family only ended when, as a teenager, she stood up to her father, who immediately left the home and never returned. Pressley says, however, that the negative imprint was already made. As a twenty-two-year-old college student at the University of Houston, she married a man who, though more educated and devout than her father, was just as abusive. When his addiction to alcohol led him to Alcoholics Anonymous and Pressley to Al-Anon, a program that supports the families of alcoholics, Pressley believed the violence would stop. When it did not, her friends at Al-Anon told her that the violence was a separate problem, because many alcoholics are not violent toward others. They also told Pressley that shelters were available for battered women like herself.

Pressley struggled along, trying to make the best of a bad situation, when one evening her husband became violent toward their two-year-old daughter. That's when she decided that enough was enough, called the Houston Area Women's Center and was invited to come in. "I told (my husband)," Pressley recounts, "and he just laughed at me. He said, 'They're going to send you right back home because you don't have any bruises yet.' So I called them back and they told me, 'We want you before you have bruises, so please come.'"

Pressley and her daughter spent three weeks at the Women's Center before a minor accident sent Pressley to the hospital. Since there was no one available to care for her daughter, her husband was called to pick her up. Upon arriving at the hospital,

Call 911—Domestic violence organizations and programs agree that if someone is in immediate danger, he or she must call 911.

File police report—A police report should always be filed, as it will help in future court proceedings.

Call the county attorney—When the immediate danger has passed, Travis County Constable Bruce Elfant recommends that the individual call the Travis County Attorney's office at 512-854-9415. The Travis County Attorney will take the case and get a protective order issued for the victim, which is then forwarded to the constable's office for service and enforcement.

Call the hotlines—SafePlace, SAHELI and the Texas Advocacy Project all offer legal advice and advocacy, so victims can call their hotlines to find out what further steps are necessary (see phone numbers below). These organizations will also help victims formulate safety plans to implement while the legal process is in progress.

Warning—Most of the web sites that provide information to address the problem of domestic violence carry a warning that all Internet communication is traceable. If you think your computer is being monitored, you should not use your computer to do research about the problem or to seek help. If Internet communication is the safest option, then you should use a safe computer. Otherwise call your local hotlines and/or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (see phone numbers below).

Who to call

Austin Police Department: Victim Services—The Victims Services web site provides a long list of phone numbers that victims can call, including hotlines, victim assistance programs, support groups, counseling services, alcohol and drug abuse, financial and other emergency assistance, legal information, and applicable Travis County departments. In addition, the site provides access to information about warning signs of domestic abuse, how family violence affects children, how to make a safety plan, and how to apply for victims compensation. Visit www.ci.austin.tx.us/police/victim.htm or call 512-974-5037.

National Domestic Violence Hotline—Help is available to callers twenty-four hours a day, every day. Hotline advocates are available for victims and anyone

calling on their behalf to provide crisis intervention, safety planning, information and referrals to agencies. Assistance is available in English and Spanish with access to more than one hundred forty languages through interpreter services. If you or someone you know is frightened about something in a relationship, call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY). For more information visit www.ndvh.org.

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline—Talk one-on-one with a trained Peer Advocate who can offer support and connect you to resources twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Call 1-866-331-9474 or 1-866-331-8453 (TTY). For more information visit www.ntdah.org.

National Sexual Assault Hotline—The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network claims to be the nation's largest anti-sexual assault organization. It operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline and carries out programs to prevent sexual assault, help victims and ensure that rapists are brought to justice. Call 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). For more information visit www.rainn.org.

SafePlace—This nonprofit organization based in Austin exists to end sexual and domestic violence through safety, healing, prevention and social change. It also provides crisis services by operating a shelter, providing counseling, and operating a twenty-four-hour hotline at 1-512-267-SAFE (7233) and 1-512-927-9616 (TTY). For more information visit www.austin-safeplace.org.

SAHELI—This nonprofit organization based in Austin provides assistance to Asian families dealing with domestic violence and abuse. It operates a confidential help line at 512-703-8745. For more information visit www.saheli-austin.org.

Texas Advocacy Project—This nonprofit organization provides free legal services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault throughout the state of Texas. It focuses only on cases involving domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking, and specializes in helping victims who can't find help from traditional nonprofit providers. The Texas Advocacy Project provides assistance through three telephone resources:

• **Family Violence Legal Line**—Call 800-374-HOPE (4673) or 512-476-5770.

• **Family Law Hotline**—

Call 800-777-FAIR (3247) or 512-476-1866.

• **Sexual Assault Legal Hotline**—Call 888-296-SAFE (7233). For more information visit www.women-law.org.

Texas Association Against Sexual Assault—This organization is committed to ending sexual violence in Texas through education, prevention and advocacy. It supports survivors on their paths to hope, healing and justice. Assistance is provided twenty-four hours a day at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). For more information visit www.taasa.org.

Texas Council on Family Violence—This organization promotes safe and healthy relationships by supporting service providers, facilitating strategic prevention efforts, and creating opportunities for freedom from domestic violence. Its web site contains extensive information about addressing the problem at www.tcfv.org. For more information call 512-794-1133.

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services—The law requires any person who believes that a child, a disabled individual, or a person sixty-five years or older is being abused, neglected or exploited to report the circumstances to this department. A person making a report in good faith is immune from civil or criminal liability. The name of the person making the report is kept confidential. Time frames for investigating reports are based on severity of allegations. Reports may be made by calling the twenty-four-hour hotline at 1-800-252-5400 or through the secure web site at www.txabusehotline.org. E-mail reports cannot be accepted.

Travis County Sheriff's Office—Travis County Sheriff Greg Hamilton maintains a zero-tolerance policy toward domestic violence and has implemented an awareness program geared to address family violence within the department's ranks.

• **Family Violence Protection Team** number is 512-974-4754.

• **Victim services**—The sheriff's office operates a Victim Services Division with full-time employees and community volunteers to provide services to crime victims in Travis County twenty-four hours per day. The Victim Service main office number is 512-854-9709. For more information visit www.tcsheff.org/victim_services.htm.

—April D. Boland

Domestic Violence Deaths 2001-2006*

Pressley told the medical staff that her accident occurred at home, rather than at the shelter, so as to conceal the abuse and protect the reputation of her husband, a medical student who was affiliated with the hospital.

Her husband arrived to pick her up when she was released from the hospital, and upon checking out, she says he grabbed her arm and whispered, "Wait until I get you home." Pressley was so frightened that she passed out at the nurse's station, and when she came to, she was forced to reveal the truth—that her husband was abusive and she needed help.

Courtney Sanchez is another Austin woman who was victimized in her relationship. She arrived in Texas a wide-eyed, ambitious young woman with plans to go to law school. But at the age of twenty-three, when she fell in love with a young man and began a family with him, her life dramatically changed. Sanchez's fiancé soon became violent, isolating her from friends and family, and trying to prevent her from working while simultaneously refusing to financially support her and their children. She says she suffered a broken eye socket, broken chin, bruised ribs and a miscarriage at the hands of her abuser.

Unfortunately, Sanchez says, the police provided "little to no help" during her ordeal, despite the fact that she had obtained a protective order against her fiancé. "He violated the protective order on a regular basis, both in Travis and Williamson County," she says. "The police would come to my house, he would flee, and they wouldn't go after him. I don't think they were taking it very seriously."

Finally, Sanchez's fiancé was temporarily jailed for beating her. When he was released, he paid her a visit, claiming he wanted to talk and work things out. Then, when he put down his coat, a gun fell out of the pocket. Sanchez did not hesitate; she immediately took her children to SafePlace, an Austin organization that provides services to victims of domestic and sexual violence. SafePlace helped her obtain another protective order and welcomed them into the shelter. "Safety—getting protection away from him—was the big part," Sanchez says.

By the time the abuse ended she was twenty-seven.

The magnitude of the problem

Unfortunately, stories like these

NAME, AGE	DIED	CAUSE OF DEATH
1 Jose A. Guardado, 36	3-29-01	Stabbed by uncle
2 Kelly Michelle Dykes, 28	5-26-01	Shot by boyfriend
3 Nancy Venegas, 16	7-5-01	Shot by boyfriend
4 Sheri Gregory, 47	8-26-01	Shot by husband
5 Ellen M. Thomas, 22	10-13-01	Stabbed by boyfriend
6 Marilyn Hill, 39	3-3-02	Shot by boyfriend
7 Michael Edward Hill, 31	3-3-02	Stabbed by girlfriend
8 Barbara Hill, 47	4-3-02	Stabbed by boyfriend
9 Janette Johnson, 19	4-3-02	Stabbed by mother's boyfriend
10 Ascencion Ruiz, Jr, 37	5-6-02	Stabbed by roommate
11 Irene Hernandez Colunga, 35	8-26-02	Shot by husband
12 Jesusita Seale, 54	10-7-02	Shot by husband
13 Diane L. Biondo, 41	10-20-02	Strangled by boyfriend
14 Domingo Salgado, 34	1-16-03	Stabbed by roommate
15 Ortralla L. Mosley, 15	3-28-03	Stabbed by boyfriend
16 Jesse Gray, 41	4-12-03	Stabbed by stepson
17 Zoila Macias Ortiz, 40	4-15-03	Strangled and stabbed by brother-in-law
18 Bettie Ann Garrett, 56	5-23-03	Stabbed by boyfriend
19 Vimit Ghodke, 32	8-30-03	Stabbed by wife (justified homicide)
20 Marivel Vargas, 18	12-10-03	Shot by ex-boyfriend
21 Eric Roy Harris, 38	1-9-04	Stabbed by girlfriend
22 Geneva Acosta, 21	5-2-04	Shot by ex-boyfriend (murder-suicide)
23 Maurice Johnson, 25	6-11-04	Stabbed by mother's ex-boyfriend
24 Cheryl Urdy, 42	6-17-04	Complications from burns by husband
25 James Martin Joste, 55	7-25-04	Shot by wife
26 Martin G. Garcia, 40	1-15-05	Stabbed by stepson
27 Miguel Angel Medina, 18	3-10-05	Shot by roommate
28 Laura M. McIntosh, 49	3-27-05	Strangled by significant other
29 Joseph Lucas, 42	3-29-05	Shot by wife
30 Lena Nguyen, 19	4-6-05	Stabbed by ex-boyfriend
31 David Robertson, 31	5-13-05	Stabbed by daughter
32 John Paul Way, 26	9-10-05	Assaulted by roommate
33 Andrea Seeley Bjorksten, 38	9-20-05	Shot by husband (murder-suicide)
34 Howard Franklin Headrick Jr., 58	11-6-05	Shot by wife (murder-suicide)
35 Jennifer Ann Crecente, 18	2-16-06	Shot by boyfriend's friend
36 Lindsey T. Luetkenhoeiter, 23	3-19-06	Shot by ex-boyfriend
37 Sheree Michelle Webb, 20	4-21-06	Shot by boyfriend (negligent homicide)

*This list does not include the names of the eight children killed, as those names are kept confidential

■ 2001
 ■ 2002
 ■ 2003
 ■ 2004
 ■ 2005
 ■ 2006

Source: Austin Police Department

are not at all uncommon, as indicated by the following statistics.

City of Austin—A total of nearly thirty-two thousand incidents of domestic were reported to the Austin Police Department in the years 2001, 2002 and 2004 through 2006, an average of more than seventeen assaults a day. (Police records for 2003 are incomplete.) Forty-five victims of domestic violence were killed in the years 2001-2006—including eight children age fourteen or younger.

State and national—Beyond the

City of Austin, the statistics for domestic violence grow astronomically:

▷ According to data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, nearly one hundred and eighty-seven thousand family violence incidents were reported in 2006 alone.

▷ The Texas Council on Family Violence reports that in 2006, one hundred and twenty Texas women were killed by either a husband or boyfriend.

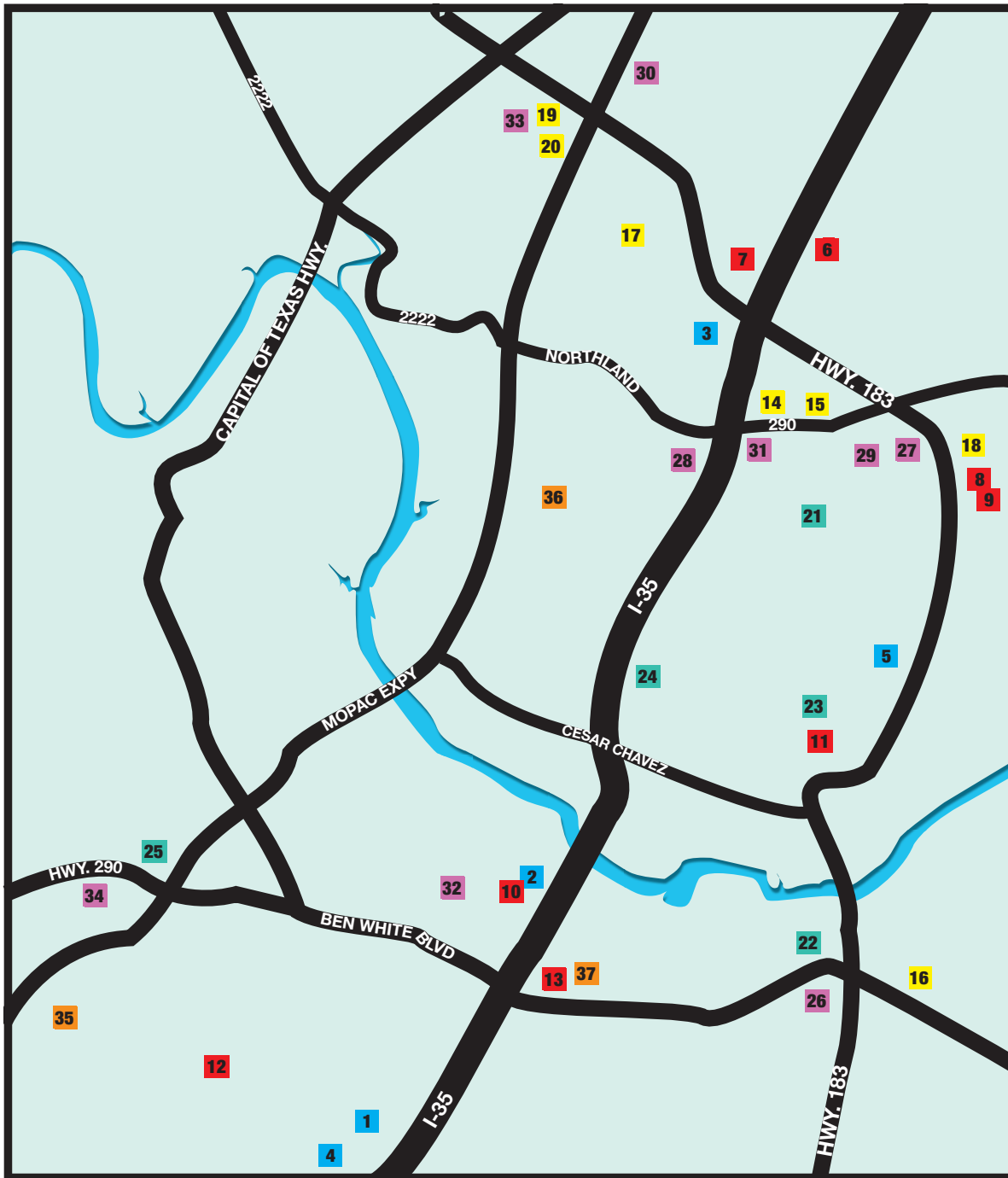
▷ The U.S. Department of Justice reported that in 2005, eleven hundred

eighty-one women were killed in domestic homicides—more than three women murdered per day.

▷ Prevent Child Abuse Texas reports that in 2003, one hundred eighty-four Texas children died as a result of abuse or neglect, and nationally, four children die from child abuse every day.

Underreporting is widespread—These numbers are astonishingly high and yet they only reflect incidents that were reported to the police. So what are the real num-

Where the Victims Died



bers? How many women, children, and yes, men, are being physically or sexually abused in Austin, throughout the country and around the world? It is hard to say exactly, but the implication is shocking, for a significant number of incidents go unreported.

▷ Travis County Constable Bruce Elfant, who enforces protective orders for victims of domestic violence, said, "My guess is that at least a third or more domestic violence cases go unreported. Just as the case with sexual assault being underreported, many

victims of domestic violence are reluctant to come forward, for a variety of reasons."

▷ The Texas Council on Family Violence conducted statewide polling in 2002 and found that only twenty percent of Texans called the police when they or a family member experienced domestic violence.

▷ The National Criminal Justice Reference Service found that from 1993 to 1998, only about half of intimate partner victimizations were reported to local law enforcement (fif-

ty-three percent of cases involving female victims and forty-six percent involving male victims).

Society pays plenty—In addition to the horrendous physical and emotional impact of family violence, the problem has serious financial implications as well. The Family Violence Prevention Fund reports that the cost of medical care made necessary by incidents of domestic violence in the United States exceeds five-point-one billion dollars every year.

The National Center for Victims

of Crime factors in not only medical services but lost earnings, costs for nonmedical victim services and intangible costs such as pain and suffering, to arrive at a total of approximately four hundred fifty billion dollars each year. Clearly, domestic violence is a significant economic issue as well as a serious societal problem.

What's being done for victims

Social services—The services offered by nonprofit organizations like Austin's SafePlace played an enormous role in providing safety to both Laura Pressley and Courtney Sanchez. Julia Spann, executive director of SafePlace, says the organization's mission is four-fold. The first objective is to provide immediate safety through a twenty-four-hour hotline and shelter. "We are trying to break the isolation of victims," Spann says. "If you are in immediate danger, you should call nine-one-one. Otherwise, call our hotline and know that there is a place you can go to. We will help you develop a safety plan and give you support." The second objective is to enable healing through counseling services and teaching victims life skills that they can use, such as job-search strategies and interviewing techniques. The third part of SafePlace's mission is to cultivate prevention through Expect Respect, its educational program that has been incorporated by many local schools. Finally, SafePlace encourages social change through community education and communication with the courts, hospitals and other institutions that interact with victims on a daily basis.

SAHELI (Support. Advocate. Heal. Empower. Listen. Inform.) offers similar services for Austin's Asian community, which is often underserved due to language and cultural barriers. For example, many Asian cultures emphasize community, and Linda Phan, SAHELI's executive director, says this often prevents victims of domestic violence from taking advantage of available programs. "What makes it difficult for a lot of people is limited access to services," she says. "There is societal pressure not to speak up or get help." In addition, once Asian victims do seek help, simple things like the approach used to relate to them can often cause complications if it is incompatible with their cultural norms. Phan says, "Some shelters aren't really aware that when someone is from a collec-

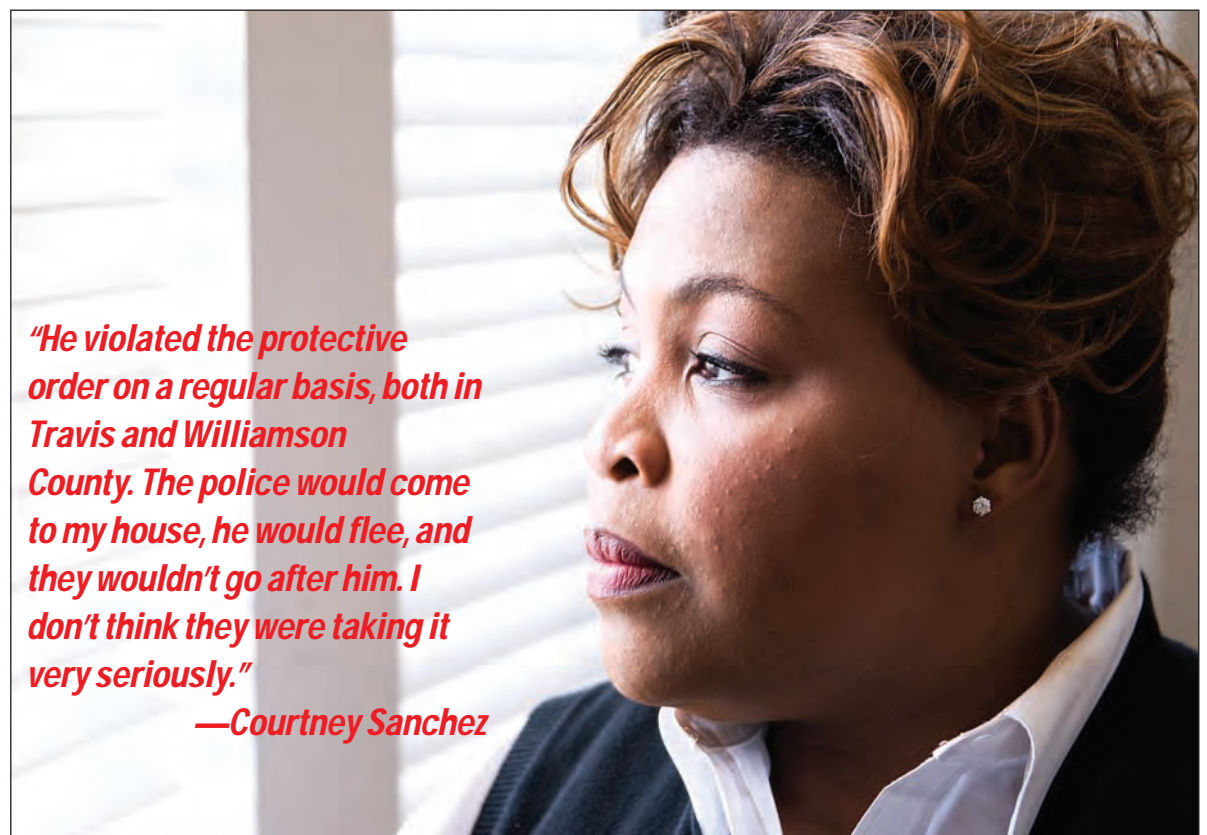
tivist society, like those in Asia, you cannot speak of independence and empowerment because their identities are formed by their families and by their community. We work within their framework.” This includes facilitating access to necessary resources like childcare, housing, and financial and medical assistance. SAHELI, named for the Hindi word for “woman friend,” also provides legal help, support groups and workshops for survivors, community education and outreach programs, and a helpline that allows individuals to call, leave a message in any Asian language, and have their call promptly returned.

The federal government is also addressing the domestic violence problem through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which President Bush signed into law in 2006. The Act, first introduced to Congress in 1994, originally created new penalties for gender-based violence and established grant programs to fund related services. The Act has continually evolved over the years, and the latest version aims to encourage the development of prevention strategies, protect victims of violence from unfair eviction from their homes, begin funding for rape-crisis centers, develop culturally- and linguistically-relevant services, enhance programs and services for victims with disabilities, and expand the scope of VAWA service provisions to include men, children and teens.

Legal assistance—Travis County Constable Bruce Elfant says Austin has quite a few important programs in place that are helping to get a handle on the domestic violence problem. His office is responsible for serving and enforcing protective orders in Travis County, and he himself is involved with the Family Violence Task Force, a group that focuses on both activism and open communication between all parties interested in addressing the problem, including organizations like SafePlace, the Travis County Sheriff’s Office, the Austin Police Department, and even the school districts.

“We want to make the process work better and the laws more effective,” Elfant says. “Our goal is not to have family violence in the community and it’s a lofty goal, unfortunately, but that’s what we do.”

In July 2007, Elfant’s office announced that a new Protective Order Alert System allows victims of fam-



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—Courtney Sanchez

ily violence to be immediately notified when a protective order has been served. “The time a protective order is served is a really important time for the victim because they need to make sure they have their safety plan ready to go,” says Elfant. “Through the new computer system, if I have a deputy serving a protective order at 4:30pm, by 4:32pm the county attorney is going to have an e-mail saying that that protective order has been served and the plaintiff should be contacted. We are really excited about that.”

Further strides were made last November, when voters approved a constitutional amendment that took effect January 1. The amendment gave law enforcement agencies the authority to arrest people who have violated temporary protective orders. The amendment also gave judges the authority to prohibit bail for these violators. Previously, only permanent protective orders were enforced in this way. Constable Elfant says while this protects the victim it poses a civil rights issue for alleged violators who have not yet had their chance to be heard in court, and he hopes that a fair, effective method of resolving such issues can be devised. “It’s nice to have that enforcement authority when there’s potential danger, but there is a really serious constitutional issue that will have to be

resolved, and I’m sensitive to that as well. Finding a way to get both parties into court quicker would be a viable option.”

In addition, a local Family Violence Protection Team exists to expedite arrests and enforcement of protective orders in domestic violence cases. This group is also comprised of many of the parties that are active in the Task Force. Constable Elfant says Austin is in a good position with regard to confronting the domestic violence problem head-on.

“This is such a progressive community when it comes to family violence. The idea that we have a task force and a protection team—in terms of getting everybody to work together, we’re probably one of the models in the country.”

Kelly White, a local activist and a survivor of domestic violence, also stresses how much progress has been made in terms of dealing with the problem.

“In the past, the police would say, ‘Oh, it’s just a domestic thing.’ They would take the husband out and walk him around the block, asking, ‘What did she do to get you mad this time?’ We have come so incredibly far.”

In 1993, when White became executive director of the Center for Battered Women—the organization that would merge with the Austin Rape

Crisis Center to become SafePlace in 1998—it was not long before she realized that there was a major issue to confront. She vowed to use her personal experiences with family violence to enhance her leadership of the organization.

White, now fifty-four, had married at the age of twenty-three and soon found herself in an abusive relationship. She was thirty-one when she finally escaped by leaving the state and not telling her ex-husband where she had gone. “I was actually divorced from him much earlier, but ending the marriage did not end the abuse,” she said.

It was before White got away, while she was living in Laramie, Wyoming, that she had been forced to take her children to a local shelter to escape stalking by her ex-husband. They were taken in immediately. At Austin’s Center for Battered Women, however, long waiting lists and limited facilities would not give everyone here the same protection. This led White to focus the organization’s efforts on raising money to build new facilities, which were completed and paid for by the time she stepped down as executive director in 2003.

Not only can Austin area victims seek legal assistance through the police, sheriff, constable and county attorney, they can also turn to the Tex-

as Advocacy Project. The Project (formerly known as the Women's Advocacy Project) offers free legal services, such as consultation, advocacy, safety plans, information on shelter locations, preparation of applications for protective orders and divorce papers, and three toll-free hotlines that victims of domestic violence or sexual assault can call for help.

Prevention through education—

While programs are necessary to combat the violence that already exists, awareness through education is the only way to minimize and hopefully eliminate future violence. In 2005, Governor Rick Perry declared October "Domestic Violence Awareness Month" in the state of Texas, and in October 2007, Constable Bruce Elfant announced the launch of a campaign to reduce teen dating violence. The campaign involves placing posters on city buses to raise awareness, as well as implementing curriculum changes and providing counseling in Austin schools.

Kelly White affirms how well such programs work by telling the story of a young man who was referred to SafePlace through Austin High School's teen dating violence program after he abused his girlfriend. After completing the program, he became a peer counselor at his school, and he was eventually hired by SafePlace to work with children. White says, "He went from being a guy that was exhibiting abusive behavior toward his significant other to a young man who now helps and works with others to keep them from being abused. That's just an amazing thing."

In fact, engaging men in both the dialogue and activism does not end there. The Men's Nonviolence Project, a project of the Texas Council on Family Violence, aims to facilitate and support the involvement of men and boys in addressing the root causes of male violence toward women. Through its web site and listserv that sends e-mail messages to subscribers, it offers relevant information, consultation, training, a forum for discussion and tools for change.

"This project is an important piece of the local, national and global efforts to inspire and support the involvement of men and boys in preventing domestic violence," says Sean Tate, prevention specialist at the Texas Council of Family Violence and operations manager of the Men's Nonviolence Project. "Over the life

Items to Have on Hand When You Are Ready to Leave

The Austin Police Department says to put aside money, credit cards (in your name), and clothes in case you have to leave home. Store them at a place away from the house, where you can get them after you leave.

You should also memorize the emergency phone number of the domestic abuse shelter, which in Austin is SafePlace at 512-267-SAFE (7233), and teach children emergency numbers.

Tell someone you trust about the violence and set up a signal to get help.

Keep important documents in a safe place. These might include:

- Driver's license and other forms of photo identification.
- Immigration papers, work permits and passports.
- Birth and marriage certificates for you and your children.
- Divorce papers.
- Social security cards.
- Protective orders.

What else?

- Have extra keys made for your house, car and post office box.
- Set aside at least one month's supply of all prescription medicines.
- Keep your cell phone and calling card.
- Write down important phone numbers (the police and sheriff).
- Pack any jewelry or small objects you can sell for money.
- Include in your getaway kit some pictures, keepsakes and toys for your children for emotional support.

—April D. Boland

Domestic Violence Warning Signs

Are you or someone you know in an abusive relationship? Use this checklist to help you decide.

Does Your Partner:

- Embarrass you with bad names and put-downs?
- Look at you or act in ways that scare you?
- Control what you do, who you see or talk to, or where you go?
- Stop you from seeing or talking to friends or family?
- Take your money, make you ask for money or refuse to give you money?
- Make all the decisions?
- Prevent you from working or attending school?
- Tell you you're a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- Act like the abuse is no big deal, it's your fault, or even deny doing it?
- Destroy your property or threaten to kill your pets?
- Intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons?
- Shove you, slap you, choke you or hit you?
- Force you to have sex?
- Force you to drop charges?
- Threaten to commit suicide?
- Threaten to kill you?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you might be in an abusive relationship. Please call one of the hotlines listed on page 57.

—April D. Boland

Source: Texas Council on Family Violence

of the project, we have seen the emergence of a number of new male leaders in nonviolence work, a significant increase in subscriptions to our listserv, and the creation of new and strategically important networks of people and organizations working to change concepts of masculinity in promotion of nonviolent relationships."

The Texas Council on Family Violence also has several other programs to raise awareness statewide. Its Red Flags campaign targets teens who might be involved in abusive dating relationships. Using age-appropriate technological channels like MySpace and YouTube, the Council advises teens on warning signs to look for and how to get help if needed. The campaign Break the Silence, Make the Call uses fliers and radio spots to encourage victims of violence to call the National Domestic Violence Hotline, where advocates can direct them to pertinent resources.

What still needs to be done

Though Austin and Travis County are making great strides in addressing the issue, the number of reported domestic violence incidents are still trending upward. Julia Spann of SafePlace says, "While awareness has dramatically increased, domestic violence still occurs on a large scale. Deep down, I think people must still think it's okay because it still happens in such large numbers."

Constable Elfant says that we still have a long way to go. "While we don't seem to have a significantly increasing problem, I don't think that we're reducing it by as much as we would like," he says.

So what further steps are necessary to protect the innocent and potentially save lives?

The legal process—To understand what changes need to be made in the legal system to help alleviate the problem, it is best to learn from those who deal firsthand with domestic violence. Mindy Montford, a Travis County assistant district attorney who is now running for election as district attorney, has prosecuted countless family violence cases. She believes that such cases must be brought to trial more quickly. "The longer you wait, the greater the chance that the victim will succumb to pressure and go back to the offender," she says. In addition, Montford says the criminal justice system needs to do a better job of educating

ing victims on the services available to them. “The Family Violence Protection Team does great things, and I would like to get them more involved early on in order to move these cases faster. I want us to say, ‘We are going to hold this victim’s hand from day one.’”

Constable Elfant agrees there’s a need to expedite the court process. “What we’re hoping to do is be as effective as we can the first time somebody gets into the process so we’re not dealing with them a second, third, or even tenth time. If it gets that far, it’s going to be pretty serious.” Yet, as with all things, finan-

to less than a thousand dollars per family served.”

Without sufficient funding for shelters and domestic violence programs, it is the victims who suffer. “Abused individuals shouldn’t be punished for what they’ve been through,” says Sanchez. “They should be given medals and encouraged, because they deserve it.” Sanchez is also a member of the campaign I Live Here, I Give Here, which aims to boost donations to local charities and nonprofit organizations in Central Texas. The campaign appears to be badly needed, because

Austin was ranked forty-eighth out of the fifty largest cities in the nation in per-capita giving, according to the campaign’s web site.

Breaking the silence—Once again, raising awareness plays a major part in the movement to end family violence and must be continued in all future efforts. This is where educational programs in schools and throughout the community will really have an impact. “There are still so many people who don’t get the enormity of the problem,” Kelly White says. “And once you know, how do you turn your back?”

Victims of abuse need to know that when they seek help for themselves, they also contribute to eliminating domestic violence in the future. Through her personal experiences, Laura Pressley knows all too well how violence in one generation can spawn violence in the next. She is proud of having escaped an abusive marriage at age twenty-four—not just for herself, but for her daughter, who recently graduated from St. Edward’s University.

Despite a widely held belief that parents should stay together for the sake of the children, Pressley says it is generally better for children to learn from healthy relationship examples. “I watched family violence as I grew up and that’s what I repeated (as a victim) in my relationship. As my daughter started dating in high school and college, I carefully watched her boyfriends and their behaviors. None of them were abusive to her. I think I got her out in time.”

Kelly White agrees. She says of her own sons, “I got those boys out of there when they were little. They are now great young men, and there is not an abusive bone in their bodies. That probably would not have been the case had I not gotten them out of there. That’s where we make the biggest difference.”

The stories of individuals like Laura Pressley, Courtney Sanchez and Kelly White, who were brave enough to break the cycle for themselves and their children, are a testament and an inspiration to other victims who may be unsure of their ability to rebuild their lives after leaving an abusive relationship. In fact, all three women are now in healthy, happy marriages with nonviolent men and are making significant contributions to society through their careers and families.

“I can’t tell you how hard it was to leave my house, go to a shelter, decide not to be married anymore, and decide to go on my own and finish my school,” Pressley says. “Looking back, I think to myself, ‘That was a hard thing to do and I’m glad I did it.’” ☺

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cial support is necessary to continue the good work our local government is doing. “We always need more resources. The county attorney needs them to be able to help people in the process faster,” he says.

Financial support—Courtney Sanchez, now thirty-three years old and out of her abusive relationship for six years, understands the need for financial support of local services quite well. In addition to having co-created Jonah Ministry, a faith-based charity that aims to provide arts and music programs to battered women and children, she is also on the board of SafePlace, where she participates in fund-raising. “There are eighty shelters in Texas and the funding they receive each year amounts

What Constitutes Domestic Violence?

The mention of domestic violence conjures up images of anything from browbeating to battering or worse. But what does the law say? What actions can be prosecuted?

Under the Texas Family Code, family violence is defined as an act by a member of a family or household against another member that is intended to result in physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or a threat that reasonably places the member in fear of imminent harm.

The law excludes the reasonable discipline of a child and defines abuse as physical injury that results in substantial harm or genuine threat; sexual contact, intercourse, or conduct; or compelling or encouraging the child to engage in sexual conduct.

The definition of family includes individuals related by consanguinity (blood) or affinity, marriage or former marriage, biological parents of the same child, foster children, foster parents, and members or former members of the same household (including roommates). This includes dating violence. The dating relationship means a relationship between individuals who have or have had a continuing relationship of a romantic or intimate nature.

—April D. Boland