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Legal Aid on Wheels

By Carolyn Lorie, Reformer Staff

[Brattleboro] – As an attorney for victims of domestic abuse, Mary Claassen knows plenty of wrenching stories. But there was one in particular that shaped her life.

It was the mid-1980s. The victim was a college-educated woman from an affluent Massachusetts family who had married a computer engineer. They both worked and led a seemingly comfortable upper-middle class life. Except it wasn't at all comfortable.

Her husband hit her and the only reason the hitting stopped was because she learned to read the threat of violence in his eyes and back down before his fists flew.

Shortly into the marriage, they had a child together and for a short time, the abuse disappeared. Then it started again – the bullying, the isolation, the controlling of her life – and she knew she had to get out.

What she didn't know was that getting out would ravage a decade of her life.

She was stalked by her ex-husband, who put water in her gas tank and sawdust in her car locks. He wrote her hundreds of letters, sometimes conciliatory, often scathing. He dragged her into court again and again and again, where she encountered lawyers and judges who understand very little about domestic violence.

At one point, the court even gave her abusive ex-husband custody of the child, as he had endless resources for sharp lawyers and a need for revenge that was boundless.

Ultimately, she escaped his wrath, got her child back and made a life for herself.

Mary Claassen remembers that story so well because she lived it.

In 2001, Claassen graduated from Vermont Law School and has dedicated herself to saving other women from the "legal hell" she experienced in fleeing from the man who battered her.

She now works for a non-profit called Have Justice Will Travel, which provides victims of domestic abuse free legal counsel – anything from advice over the phone to long-term representation.

“[My experience] is so much a part of the reason that I do what I do,” says Claassen. “When I have clients who talk to me on the phone, I know exactly what they are talking about.”

Wynona Ward, who grew up in rural Vermont watching her father beat and choke her mother, founded the non-profit in 1998. Ward realized that isolation and lack of resources kept women in abusive relationships and that rural women were especially prone to both.

Many could not get to a lawyer even if they wanted to, so Ward decided that lawyers had to get to them – that’s the “will travel” part of the plan.

With the help of paralegal Diana Lischer-Goodband, Claassen runs a law office that she can take with her to whatever location a woman needs – her home, a diner, a library. Everything is portable and nearly any place can be transformed into a temporary law office.

In addition to representing women in family court, the organization refers women to other services in the community. Lischer-Goodband keeps a long list of social service agencies in the area that can help women with the many details involved in fleeing a batterer and starting a new life.

One of the biggest obstacles for women is money, or rather, the lack of it. Many go through the taxing process of getting a restraining order or even filing for divorce, only to return to their abusive partners out of economic desperation.

“You can get all that stuff set up but financially your world is upside down,” says Claassen. “If you aren’t able to get that together, it’s very tempting to let the batterer back into your life.”

Many men corner women into dependency knowing that leaving will be harder or tell them that they will lose custody of the children if they cannot support them. Often battered women don’t know the law or their rights and believe what they are told. Claassen and Lischer-Goodband help untangle the web of deception.

Compared to her experience in Massachusetts more than a decade ago, Claassen says that Brattleboro offers a much more supportive environment for women leaving abusive relationships.

From the courts to the community, there is a much more thorough understanding of the patterns, consequences and signs of domestic abuse.

Credit for this, says Claassen, goes to the Women’s Crisis Center.

“I will always refer women to the Women’s Crisis Center. They are great. I can’t say enough about them,” she says.

Because of the close relationship with the center, Have Justice Will Travel was able to secure a grant from the Department of Justice, which stipulated that the lawyers must work with a community organization to get the funding.

The money was badly needed, as the organization relies entirely on grants and donations. Funding for Lischer-Goodband's position is due to run out in September and Claassen's is funded for only two more years.

Grants and donations are being sought, as their services clearly fill a need in the community. There are two other Have Justice Will Travel offices in Vermont – one in Chelsea, the other in Bennington – that also need financial support.

Though Claassen considers the area to be generally supportive of women, it is by no means free of domestic violence.

Lischer-Goodband and Claassen anticipate an increase of calls during the holiday season, as stress often increases the level of abuse. The Monday after Thanksgiving, phones in the office rang non-stop.

“We live in an enlightened community here and it's wonderful but there's still an awful lot of domestic violence,” says Claassen. “I'm fully hoping that we get funded and I'm doing this into my 70s.”

Those interested in making donations may call [802] 254-8900.

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