



PHILIPINE
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PANGLOSS GOLF
MOUNTAIN POND

Place for Peace

BY CHRISTOPHER CARBONE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL THAD CARTER

"When I walked in the door, I said, 'I'm here and I'm ready to do some justice work'," says Karen Wilson, director of community education for SafePlace. The path she took to her current position certainly wasn't easy, but she's earned her status as a mentor, educator and leader in the realm of sexual abuse education and prevention.

SafePlace – a pioneering organization that aims to eradicate sexual abuse, rape and domestic violence through education, awareness, healing and community – has been part of Austin in some iteration for many years. It formed 11 years ago, resulting from the merger of the Austin Rape Crisis Center (founded in 1974) and the Center for Battered Women (founded in 1977). Those groups were among the very first of their kind in Texas.

Within the broad, far-reaching goals of the organization, Wilson works to increase and enhance public awareness around the issue of domestic violence, to improve system responses for survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence and to engage in social change activity. "We can change some of the root causes," she says. "Looking at issues around sexism, racism, homophobia and classism."

"I'm a survivor of rape and partner abuse and family violence. One relationship that was the most dangerous was one I almost died in," Wilson says, in the matter-of-fact tone that permeates my conversation with her and her colleague, Cynthia Trejo, at SafePlace's offices. "Even though that was almost 20 years ago, I still don't allow my picture to be put out there."

Wilson's comprehensive tome, "When Violence Begins At Home," addresses every aspect of partner abuse and sexual violence, including a chapter about what to do if you have to go into hiding – which is something that Wilson herself was forced to do. Clearly, she's a confident woman at peace with her past and able to utilize her own struggles for the benefit of many others.

Indeed, the group provides a wide range of services: a 24-hour hotline for anyone in need of information or shelter, dozens of unique and community-specific (catering to one's race, gender, ethnic and/or socioeconomic background) educational programs as well as a 105-bed emergency shelter complex. After noting that SafePlace also has a child development center on its campus, Wilson recalls a heartbreaking turn of events that she learned about during her first week on the job. "School had started and a survivor's only child had gone back to school. She dropped her child off at school, then her husband picked up the child, took the child overseas and killed the child."

"When people call our hotline, we do give them resources within the community, including numbers to shelters in surrounding towns," says Trejo. The average length of stay in SafePlace's shelter – which has a long waiting list – is one to two months and the shelter employs six full-time case managers. The group also helps place survivors in permanent housing through a variety of partnerships it has with residential buildings in the area. The organization, which employs 140 people, certainly couldn't function without its army of dedicated volunteers – who number between 250 and 300.

Wilson feels that the issue of same-sex domestic abuse and sexual violence is largely still in the closet. "The community really hasn't stepped up to the plate in putting that out there," she says. "I understand why: We live in a homophobic world and anything that can be used against us will."

The obvious problem is that for survivors in the queer community, the extra layer of silence isn't helpful. Even so, the group has worked with Waterloo Counseling Center, OutYouth and AIDS Services of Austin in an attempt to reach out to LGBT survivors. One training program that Wilson heads up is called "Out of the Closet: Dynamics of Same-Sex Partner Violence."

Another misconception around issues of sexual violence is that SafePlace only serves women. In fact, the group offers a once-per-week support group for male survivors. All of their services are available to anyone in Travis County – regardless of race, sexual orientation or gender.

SafePlace has held its own amidst the economic downturn – trimming its budgets as much as possible in lieu of laying off employees. The group receives its funding from a variety of state, local and federal grants, as well as donations and two big annual fundraisers. Even so, the greatest challenge is having enough resources to serve the entire county. "No matter what our hearts desire, if we don't have the resources that we need, we can't do this to the level that we want to do," Wilson says. "Quite frankly, that's frustrating."

Even so, the organization's reach is impressive and these numbers only tell part of the story. In 2008, a total of 31,106 nights of emergency shelter were provided to 693 individuals; SafePlace advocates accompanied and supported 266 rape survivors at area hospitals during their sexual assault nurses exam; 10,998 middle and high school students participated in sexual and domestic violence prevention activities or presentations; and the 24-hour hotline provided crisis intervention, resource information and safety planning to 12,482 callers affected by sexual and domestic violence.

Wilson, whose mother is also a survivor, got her start at a children's advocate at a rape crisis center. After earning her master's in adult education and her doctorate in education at Texas A&M ("I wasn't out yet!" she notes, with a smile), she came to work for the Center for Battered Women in 1992 – starting out as volunteer coordinator – and from that point on, she'd found her home.

For Trejo, seeing her clients achieve day-to-day victories is what continues to inspire and motivate her. Shortly before our conversation, she had taken a survivor on the bus and taught her how to ride it. "That was something she needed to learn in order to begin working and it was a huge deal to her. She was like, 'My batterer said I couldn't do this. He was totally wrong!'"

"The thing that tickles me to no end is that, on a daily basis, I get to fight injustice with a group of people that I just adore," Wilson says. "I've done this work in a lot of different areas and I've never seen a community rally behind us like Austin has." ■