



November 21, 2007

News Skips Context in 24-7 Peterson Coverage

By Anne Friedman Glauber, WeNews commentator

News reports have probed every angle in the Stacy Peterson disappearance and how her husband became the prime suspect. But when Anne Glauber tried to persuade media producers to interview an advocate about domestic violence, there were no takers.

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS) – It was during the third straight day of coverage of the Stacy Peterson story on NBC's "Today Show" that I started to have hope.

I head up the Global Issues Communications group at Ruder Finn, a public relations agency in New York, and increasing awareness about domestic violence is an important part of our practice.

It is a challenging assignment: Despite the pervasiveness of domestic violence, it is difficult to generate sustained media visibility on the issue. When trying to interest journalists and producers in covering domestic violence or intimate partner abuse, my staff and I are often told, "We covered domestic violence once already."

But the relentless media coverage of Stacy Peterson's disappearance seems to have provided a specific news peg upon which to discuss the larger issue of domestic violence in this country.

According to the news reports, Stacy Peterson's husband, police Sgt. Drew Peterson of Bolingbrook, Ill., was named officially as a suspect and her disappearance was under investigation. Peterson's third wife had died in mysterious circumstance in 2004 and her body was being exhumed for further



Anne Glauber

examination. During their marriage, police were called to their home five times for reports of domestic violence.

In addition, Stacy Peterson's friends and family had reported conversations and e-mails with her before she disappeared, saying she was increasingly fearful and unhappy living with her husband. She described to them a situation where she was forbidden to see friends and family and controlled 24-7 by her husband. Focused on Question of Guilt As I watched the Nov. 8 "Today Show" segment on Drew Peterson's body language, I could not believe that at least five minutes of prime network time were spent discussing whether he was lying in his interview with Matt Lauer when he told him that his wife had run off with another man.

This "lying" segment had followed a packaged segment the previous day on why people who are guilty of murder provide interviews to the media. If the "Today Show" devoted so much time to such extraneous, frivolous and inconsequential aspects of this story, they would certainly want to discuss the core issue, I thought.

They would certainly want to provide information about domestic violence that could actually help their viewers.

But I was dead wrong. The next few days demonstrated how difficult it is to prevail upon producers and reporters to include substantive information when reporting on the news about abuse. Like the "Today Show," many of the morning broadcast programs and cable news channels gave heavy coverage to the Peterson disappearance but lacked a focus on domestic violence, which affects up to 3 million U.S. women and girls each year.

Indeed, I have yet to read experts' opinions about domestic violence or hear them interviewed in any of the news reports.

Passed Over by the Press

The national wire services were not covering the topic either.

In the 10 stories written about this case by the Associated Press in the last two weeks alone, detailing the reactions of former wives, stepchildren, family members and friends who recount the fear and concern expressed by Stacy Peterson, not one article mentioned the problem of domestic violence. They included interviews with siblings of the previous wives and Peterson's former stepdaughter, who said how threatening and abusive Drew Peterson was.

But the stories did not include discussions or interviews with anti-violence advocates commenting on this behavior in terms of domestic violence patterns or adding a box of information that could have highlighted domestic violence resources in the state.

One AP reporter, Don Babwin, reported in a Nov. 14 article on the fact that police were informed about abuse when Peterson was married to his third wife. Yet the reporter did not include any information about how common the lack of police follow-up actually is or where people could get help in a similar situation.

Babwin's story could have been an opportunity to interview a domestic violence expert to put the news in a larger context. Yet his article was written as if it had no relation to the larger issue of domestic and intimate partner violence in this country.

Tuned Out on TV

Broadcast coverage was even more frustrating for its lack of discussion about domestic violence because producers appeared to be competing to provide their viewers with a different perspective, eager to introduce some fresh new angle into the news cycle.

ABC's "Good Morning America" has been steady in following the case with new developments on a daily basis, including a Nov. 15 interview with the sister of Peterson's third wife, Kathleen Savio. She admitted that her sister came to her days before her "accidental death" saying "he was going to kill her and it was going to look like an accident."

After this horrific development, instead of discussing domestic violence or highlighting the signs--providing viewers with specific information on how to help friends and family they suspect are being abused – "Good Morning America" approached Drew Peterson's first wife, Carol Brown, who married him over 30 years ago and said little during her interview.

Since so much media time was being spent on the Peterson case, I thought we had a chance to break through this bias against reporting about domestic violence; certainly we could leverage the attention on Peterson to discuss the larger problem.

I also was optimistic about overcoming these barriers because we were actually working with one of the top domestic violence experts in the country last week: Sheryl Cates, the director of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. We were working with her on their Vital Link event honoring Liz Claiborne Inc., Stacy Morrison, editor in chief of Redbook, and actor Robin Givens for their efforts to increase awareness about domestic violence. It was clear that this was an opportunity for Cates to provide information that could help women and their children.

In the context of the Peterson story, Cates could speak about the role of bystanders and what they could do to help. She could advise on how the national hotline helps bystanders as well as victims. She could speak about what may prevent someone living in abusive situations from calling the hotline and could

outline a number of ways to overcome those fears. She could provide substantive advice and information that could help thousands of women watching the “Today Show” or CNN or “Good Morning America.” She could save lives.

Unfortunately, no one has yet agreed to put her on camera to do so.

We spoke to about a dozen producers to see if they wanted to interview Cates. Most of these producers were women. All said they would keep her name on file. None agreed to make the link in coverage between the missing woman and discussing domestic violence.

It is still unclear to me why the media balks at covering this fundamental element of the story that impacts millions of women. But what is frustratingly clear is that if the media will not report substantively on this issue--when it is part of breaking news--then we have lost a significant opportunity to reduce the incidences of domestic violence and abuse in this country.

Anne Friedman Glauber is an executive vice president at Ruder Finn Public relations and director of Global Issues Communications. In 2004, she was a Women’s eNews 21 Leader for founding the Business Council for Peace.

Copyright © 2007 Women’s eNews.