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No One to Turn to; Battered Woman Found Little Help, Even from Church

By Marina Pisano

The first blow struck before she could run, a sharp crack just below the knees that sent her crashing to the floor in pain, and as she tried to crawl away, her husband hit her again and again with a golf club.

“Run,” she told her two little boys, and they ran to their bedroom, terrified.

“Get up, bitch,” her husband demanded as he swung the club.

“The pain was unbearable, but all I could think of was protecting my baby, so I stayed doubled over on the floor, screaming for him to stop,” recalls author Janice Romney Farnsworth, who was seven months pregnant at the time. The blows hit the same side of her body over and over, and when she later undressed and looked in the mirror, she saw that her back, hip, thigh and leg looked like slabs of raw meat, swollen, blue and purple. Soon after, in May 1982, her third child was born, unharmed by the battering. A hospital nurse asked about the bruises, and Farnsworth gave her some silly excuse.

It was just one of many beatings. The verbal and physical abuse that started when they were dating continued, even as the advice she says she received from a Mormon bishop at her temple in Arizona remained constant. Farnsworth said her bishop told her she must be doing something wrong, that she should pay her tithe, hold family home meetings weekly, be obedient and forgive her husband.

“The church in everything it does has this image of the clean-cut, beautiful family in an absolutely ideal setting. It’s just perfect,” Farnsworth says of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the faith in which she was raised and married in a sanctified temple wedding, considered an eternal marriage. “Anything that differs from that perfect image, they cover up. If you have a problem, you’re taught to go to your bishop. You don’t call 911.”

Kim Farah, a spokeswoman for the Mormon church in Salt Lake City, won’t comment on Farnsworth’s experience, but she says it does not reflect policy and cites numerous sermons denouncing abuse and special training and a help line to aid local congregation leaders dealing with it.

“The church, of course, is very centered on families. But in no way would we ask someone to go back into an abusive situation,” Farah says.

The sanctity of marriage and religion, not only the Mormon church but other religions too, often come up, says Marta Pelaez, president of Family Violence Prevention Services. Addressing that concern, the Texas Council on Family Violence in 2004 launched the Communities of Faith Project, opening a dialogue with religious leaders to raise awareness and ensure protection for the abused.

Farnsworth, author of “Beneath Wings of an Angel” (Synergy Books, \$21.95), knows criticism of the church is controversial. But she believed she had to be obedient to her husband and keep the family together at all costs even as she was punched, choked, slammed against the wall and scalded. It was only after six children, 15 years of marriage, a psychiatric breakdown and treatment for debilitating depression (later diagnosed as bipolar disorder) that she was able to leave and subsequently get a divorce. It was 1992, and her oldest child was 13, her youngest 3.

She remarried 10 years ago, and after her ex-husband died four years ago, she began writing about the ordeal. Her new book, is part autobiography – painful to read, at times – and part a primer for survival and physical and spiritual recovery for anyone caught in the cycle of domestic violence. And there are lots of them out there.

The national Family Violence Prevention Fund says that up to 30 percent of American women will be physically abused by a partner during their lifetimes. According to Family Violence Prevention Services, which runs the 120-bed Battered Women’s Shelter in Bexar County, that shelter served 2,300 women and children last year.

“I hope the book shows that the only way we’re going to change this is when we women take responsibility. It’s a choice to stay,” Farnsworth, 51, says over coffee before a recent book signing in San Antonio. “I hope women can look far ahead enough to see the damage it does to children (to witness and experience abuse). They are hurt at the roots.”

In the book, she recounts how her husband beat several of the children, too, and how they became anxious and angry, angry with her for not protecting them. Some acted out and ran away. One son remains a heavy drug user, following a pattern of substance abuse that experts see in youth from violent homes. It’s only in recent years, she says, that the children have come to understand what they went through.

In many ways, her story illustrates the complex dynamics and disturbing patterns seen in domestic violence, starting with not wanting to believe her partner was abusive even after the first blows landed. She left him but returned after he pleaded with her and said he was sorry. She never went to a shelter. She refused to press charges when the police came. She knew he had been abused as a child and had low self-esteem, so for a long time, she was convinced she could somehow change his abrasive, explosive behavior. Later, she just tried to survive it.

Abuse is progressive and cyclical, says Pelaez. “There are times when things are OK – the honeymoon periods that always follow the explosion. The man comes back and is very

apologetic. He buys flowers. They go out to dinner. She's reinforced in what every woman wants – a good marriage. If she stays, something good will happen. Then there are the put-downs, the humiliation and the blows.”

The cycle starts again.

Farnsworth found the abuse always escalated during pregnancy, another pattern Pelaez says. “At the very core of what (the batterer) displays is very low self-esteem and insecurity. These men are threatened by things that normal men are not threatened by. A child is a threat. They're jealous at the attention a child will get. They prey on vulnerable women, and women are most vulnerable during pregnancy.”

Along with the blows, there was verbal abuse and shame and humiliation in front of the children. “No matter what I did, I was never thin enough or pretty enough,” Farnsworth says. “He told me I was stupid.”

Like about 60 percent of battered women, Farnsworth suffered from depression. As her depression and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness deepened, she was unable to work, unable to care for her children or the house and finally unable to get out of bed. One night, she attempted suicide by swallowing a fistful of pills.

“In my eyes, I was everything my husband accused me of being, a negligent mother, a miserable housekeeper, an undesirable wife,” Farnsworth says. “I didn't think I deserved better.”

That is the thing about domestic violence, Pelaez says. “It ultimately renders a woman paralyzed with denial and low self-esteem. They don't believe they are capable of doing anything and must continue to bear it.”

Farnsworth's low self-esteem and feelings of humiliation and shame started early. She was sexually abused when she was 5. While single, she was raped on a date and got pregnant. She agonized over what to do but finally decided on an abortion. That triggered a torrent of guilt. She was disfellowshipped by the Mormon church and underwent six months of disciplinary action before being restored as a participating member.

But it was certain teachings of her faith, Farnsworth asserts, especially concerning the power of her husband as part of the all-male lay priesthood and the traditional role of women, that kept her trapped in the abusive marriage so long.

Patricia Castillo, executive director of the advocacy P.E.A.C.E. Initiative, who sometimes speaks in churches on the issue, says she still hears about clergy advising women to stay in abusive marriages. “But we're also beginning to hear the message that when you introduce violence into the sacred marriage vows, that invalidates the sacredness of those vows.”

These days, Farnsworth, who lives in northern Arizona, maintains an e-mail advocacy network – authorwings@yahoo.com – and hears regularly from abused women. Web site: www.beneathangelwings.com.

At the end, she wasn't angry with her ex-husband. Before he died, he came to see her and apologized, and he told the children what happened was his fault, not their mother's. The memories and powerful emotions will always be there, but she is healing and hopes her work will help others heal as well. Domestic violence is not some faceless, remote societal problem, Farnsworth says.

“A battered woman is someone's mother, sister, daughter and friend. It's someone you know.”

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Resources for Abused Women

- Call 911 in a medical/police emergency
- Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-7233, (800) 787-3224 (TTY)
- Battered Women's Shelter Hotline: (210) 733-8810
- Rape Crisis Center 24-Hour Hotline: (210) 349-7273
- United Way Help Line: (210) 227-4357
- District Attorney's Office/Protective Orders: (210) 335-2865
- Police Victims Advocacy Section: (210) 207-2141
- Victim counseling/education for batterers: (210) 930-3669

Domestic Violence Facts

A National Snapshot

- Women account for 85 percent of the victims of intimate-partner violence.
- 588,490 American women were victims of nonfatal violence committed by an intimate partner in 2001; 103,220 men were victims of such violence.
- 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner in 2000; 440 men were killed by an intimate partner.
- About 25 percent of American women report being physically assaulted or raped by a current or former spouse, partner or date during their lifetimes.
- Twenty percent to 30 percent of American women will be physically abused by a partner during their lifetimes.
- About one in five female students in high school reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner (2001).
- For 30 percent of women who are abused, the first incident occurs during pregnancy; about 324,000 women a year experience abuse by an intimate partner during pregnancy.
- Thirty percent to 40 percent of women's emergency room visits are for injuries from violence.
- Thirty percent of women killed in the U.S. are killed by husbands or intimate partners.
- Sixty percent of women who are abused suffer from depression; many may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

- Fifty percent of men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently assaulted their children, according to one survey.
- Between 3.3 million and 10 million children witness some type of domestic violence at home each year and are more likely to exhibit behavioral and health problems, including depression, anxiety and violence toward peers.
- Men who witnessed domestic violence as children are twice as likely to abuse their own partners as men with nonviolent parents. Girls who witness domestic violence are more likely to tolerate abuse as adults.
- Health-related costs of physical assault, rape, stalking and homicide by intimate partners exceeds \$5.8 billion a year.

Abuse in Texas in 2003

- 185,299 family-violence incidents occurred.
- 153 women were killed by intimate partners.
- 1,545 adults received shelter from abusive relationships, 18,188 children received shelter.

Polling in Texas in 2002

- Thirty-one percent of all Texans report they have been severely abused at some point in their lifetime, women at a higher rate than men.
- Forty-seven percent of all Texans have experienced some form of domestic violence (severe, verbal and/or forced isolation from family and friends) at some point in their lives.

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