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Playbook for Life

By Eileen McNamara

It is not his usual arena, but the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing room felt as comfortable yesterday to M.L. Carr as the old Garden did in his years with the championship Boston Celtics.

He was not on Capitol Hill to talk about labor lockouts or steroid use in professional sports. He was in Washington to lobby for reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act.

It is not such a stretch, really. Even when he played and coached in the National Basketball Association, Carr spent much of his off-court time as a motivational writer and speaker, talking especially with young people about the importance of education and the false allure of drugs and violence.

Since 1997, when he left the Celtics as director of basket ball operations, Carr has expanded those efforts as founder of WARM2Kids (www.warm2kids.com), an acronym for We're All Role Models to Kids, an online resource for parents and teenagers, and as coauthor of "Coaching Boys Into Men," a "playbook" designed to open the eyes of young male athletes to attitudes that can lead to violence against young women.

"This is my life work," he said yesterday. "The mission of WARM2Kids is to inform, instruct, and inspire our youth to make positive life decisions." To that end, Carr also serves on the board of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, a research and advocacy group that was instrumental in drafting the Violence Against Women Act in 1994. It was in that capacity that Carr testified yesterday.

Congress reauthorized the act in 2000, strengthening provisions designed to promote prevention, but if Congress does not reconfirm its commitment, the law will expire in September. The Judiciary Committee is considering amendments that would dedicate more resources to homeless women, 92 percent of whom report having been assaulted earlier in life, and to women, including undocumented immigrants, whose legal status leaves them reluctant to seek help.

Nonlethal violence against women has declined since the law was enacted, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, but more than 1,000 women are killed every year in this country by their husbands or boyfriends. "We would be kidding ourselves to think we don't need to stay on top of this problem," Carr said by phone after his testimony. "It is such an insidious issue. I think we have the best shot at stopping it if we reach kids early and teach their parents

and their teachers how to talk about it.”

For the senators, Carr drew a parallel to his playing days. “Basketball is all about numbers; if you don’t put impressive numbers on the board, you don’t become champions,” he said, before rattling off some of the nation’s most frightening statistics: 10 million children a year witness domestic violence, increasing the likelihood that they will become victims or perpetrators of violence themselves; two-thirds of all sexual assaults happen to children under age 18; the highest rate of nonfatal violence from a boyfriend or spouse is suffered between the ages of 16 and 24.

The need to reach young people is especially pressing. According to a 2001 Harvard School of Public Health study, 1 in 5 public high school girls reported suffering physical and or sexual assault at the hands of a boyfriend. In another study by the National Institute of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 13 percent of female college students reported being stalked by a former boyfriend, twice as many young women as in the general population.

Andrea Carr works with her dad at WARM2Kids. At 23, she is the youngest of M.L. and Sylvia Carr’s three children. She sees his anti violence work as a logical extension of his life. “Publicly, he preaches caution in everyday interactions, friendships as well as relationships, and the importance of getting out of unhealthy situations before they escalate,” she said. “Privately, this is something he also practices with us at home. Not everyone has such a positive role model in their life.”

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