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Program Turns Spotlight on Teen Dating Violence

By Cara Spaziani

WASHINGTON – It was his “charm” that hooked Ivette Diaz.

It’s his abuse that, years later, leaves her frightened.

In the beginning, “he was incredibly sweet, I was enamored by him,” said Diaz, who at the age of 15 started dating who would soon become her daughter’s father.

But two months into her pregnancy Diaz’s boyfriend became possessive, not allowing her to see her family. The physical and verbal abuse she endured started soon after.

“He would punch me, slap me, kick me,” Diaz said. “I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t leave. I never reached out to my family because he told me he would kill me.”

Only after the birth of her daughter did Diaz consider leaving. Diaz did not press charges against her boyfriend, although a judge has issued an order of protection against him.

“The same day I left he punched me and I fell to the ground,” Diaz said. “To this day I am still terrified of him.”

But now Diaz is taking her fear and helping other female teens who have been victims of physical or verbal abuse through “Love is not Abuse,” a dating violence- and abuse-prevention program that will be taught in ninth-grade English and health classes.

The curriculum was announced Thursday during a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington.

“We’re trying to take stigma away from the issue with the hope that more people will come forward and more will be heard about it,” said Jane Randel, vice president of corporate communications at Liz Claiborne Inc., which is sponsoring the new program.

According to a new survey conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited, one in three teens ages 13-18 know a friend who has been hit, punched, kicked, slapped, choked or physically hurt by

their partner. One in every five girls who have asked to break up with their boyfriend said their partner threatened violence or self-harm.

More frightening, said Michael Wood, the vice president of TRU, is that only 33 percent of teens who have been in or known about an abusive relationship have told anyone about it.

“This data shows that ... teens don’t have the knowledge to handle this type of abuse,” Wood said.

The “Love is not Abuse” curriculum will be implemented this fall in 10 schools that represent urban, suburban and rural demographics. Herbert Hoover High School in San Diego, Furness High School in Philadelphia and Sebring High School in Sebring, Fla., are among those that will be participating. Each lesson will begin with a reading from a poem or short story about an abusive relationship that students can later discuss and write about.

According to Julie Fulcher, the director of Break the Cycle Washington, D.C., an organization that provides legal services and helps teens end domestic violence, the majority of dating violence occurs between the ages of 16 and 24. Fulcher hopes that by starting the program in the ninth grade, teens will learn to how to handle abusive relationships before they get into one.

“We have to address this as young as possible,” Fulcher said. “It is only working with young people that we’re going to be able to stop this.”

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